When I reflect on my internship with Queers for Economic Justice in the summer of 2010, I feel overwhelmed at trying to describe my experience in a 5-page report. At the same time, though, I feel like I can sum up my internship in one word: transformational. My personal politics were constantly being challenged and transformed through being exposed to new ideas and new ways of seeing the world. While at QEJ I had the chance to meet, work with, and build personal relationships with some amazing activists who work tirelessly to transform their communities. Most importantly, I had the chance to work on some really important projects involving low-income and homeless queer people in New York City—work that almost no one else is doing.

I also got to experience the real, less glamorous side of doing social justice work at an organization that is struggling to get enough funding to operate on a basic level and to continue to do important work. At times I had little direction and supervision, and sometimes it was a challenge to figure out how to best use my time at the organization, but that challenge was also an opportunity for me to do some self-guided projects, which were very rewarding in the end.

My first weeks at QEJ were some of the most demanding. Along with the director of the Welfare Warriors Project, Reina Gossett, QEJ interns and volunteers, and members of the Welfare Warriors Research Collaborative, I helped to write and edit a Participatory Action Research report on low-income and homeless queer and trans people
in New York City. The report, “A Fabulous Attitude: Low-Income LGBTQNC People Surviving and Thriving on Shelter, Love and Knowledge,” is based on surveys and interviews of low-income and homeless queer people, focusing on the ways in which they empower themselves to deal with the institutionalized injustices they face on a daily basis as well as work to transform their communities. I also planned an event to release the report, which included a presentation about the report, the screening of a documentary about the Welfare Warriors Research Collaborative and the making of the report as well as a lively discussion about the issues discussed in the report. I was involved in every aspect of planning the event, from securing the space, to renting sound equipment, to publicity, to planning the program, to getting enough food donations to feed 60 people a full dinner. This was at times incredibly stressful, but it also helped me to develop better organizational skills, as well as the incredibly valuable skill of asking strangers for money and food. The event went amazingly well—I was a little bit amazed that we pulled it off. The space was packed, with people from many different communities in attendance, and it seemed like everyone who came brought something unique to the space. The program and film were well received, and the discussion afterwards showed that a lot of people took something away from the event.

Right after the report release event, I went with QEJ to the Allied Media Conference in Detroit, Michigan. It was a really intense experience, as social justice conferences always are, and it gave me something to contrast my experiences at QEJ to. Being around a lot of activists is always very intense for me because I sense a lot of competitiveness between people about the work they are doing. Before the AMC I sometimes had a sense of discomfort while surrounded by a lot of activists because of
this, and it was good to put a name to it and reflect on it while at the AMC. I also had some helpful conversations with Reina about it, and she helped me to process it and give me advice on how to deal with it. While at the AMC I also got some perspective on the place of academia in social justice activism. Most of my activism and in the past had been with other college students or somehow affiliated with academic institutions, and before the AMC I had never really had to question my position as someone with this affiliation. Based on the reactions of a few people I talked to, I found myself reluctant to tell people that I was a college student. I was a little bit resentful at first, especially after many conversations with Reina in which she told me that “We all do what we can with what we have,” but after some more thought I remembered the importance of acknowledging and owning one’s privilege, and that affiliation with an academic institution is in many ways a privilege. The AMC was also a chance to get to know the people I worked with, both in Detroit and on the 12-hour car rides to and from New York City.

Another major project I worked on this summer was QEJ’s Shelter Project. QEJ goes into New York City’s homeless shelters and runs support groups for queer and trans homeless people. I visited shelters regularly to get the word out about QEJ events, and participated in a few of the support groups. One of the most eye-opening experiences of my summer was going into the shelters and seeing what life is like for New York City’s homeless. After having read about the conditions in the shelter system in the report I worked on at the beginning of the summer, I still wasn’t prepared for what it felt like being in the shelter. One of the interview participants from the report described living in a shelter as being just like being in prison, except that you can leave during the day. This
was the first thing that came to mind when I walked through the doors of a shelter for the first time. At the same time, though, through talking to shelter residents and through going to the support groups, I was struck by the ways in which I noticed that the shelter residents actively practiced self-care and stayed optimistic about their situations, as well as helping others out when they could. Although the most common concern expressed at our support group check-ins was getting out of the shelter and into permanent housing, residents were very supportive of each other, sharing information about the housing process and checking in with each other. This was something that was discussed in the report, and to see it in real-life made it even more salient.

Experiences like this one helped to transform my politics and how I see the world. QEJ has completely redefined for me what I see as queer issues, and the kinds of issues I want to work on. Another experience that stands out to me was when Hilary and I went with Kenyon, the executive director, to a meeting of the Drug Policy Alliance, an organization that works on drug policy reform. On our walk back to the office after the meeting, Kenyon gave Hilary and me a little “quiz” on why drug policy is a queer issue and why QEJ is involved in those conversations. This reaffirmed for me why I wanted to work with QEJ in the first place: their politics are radically inclusive and empowering.

Throughout the summer I was put in charge of various administrative tasks like coordinating large mailings and coordinating volunteer outreach that gave me experience in managing entire projects start-to-finish. Having complete responsibility for entire projects as an intern is one of the most rewarding parts of working for a small organization. I made all the decision on how to best execute each aspect of the project, solve problems that came up and use my creativity in new ways. I developed practical
skills and gained experience that I will continue to use throughout my career in social justice and non-profit work. I also continued to work on planning events throughout the rest of the summer, helping to organize and publicize a series of fundraisers at a local bar, as well as organizing and publicizing meetings to recruit and coordinate volunteers.

One of the challenges I met at QEJ was that there were times when I had little guidance from staff and wasn’t really sure how to best use my time. After Reina left at the end of June there were only 2 full-time staff members and one part-time, and one of the full-time staffers was out of the office a lot for personal reasons. This sometimes left Hilary, the other intern, and me at a loss for what to do. We worked together a few times to come up with projects that we could work on, but one of the things I wish that I had done differently is taken more initiative to come up with more substantial projects. At the time it seemed really difficult to do work without much guidance from staff, but I wish that I had worked harder to push through that mental block and think about what I might have wanted to work on on my own. Advice I would give to future interns at QEJ is to be prepared to work independently, because there might be times when you don’t have a lot of guidance. Think deeply about what you want to get out of your internship, what projects you might want to work on and how you might set about working on some of those projects.

Overall, my summer interning with QEJ in New York City was amazingly fulfilling on so many different levels. I met some truly amazing people and got the chance to do some amazing work, and the whole experience was absolutely transformative.