“Pick someone and tell me why you think this person is a leader,” said Coti, the Program Coordinator and one of my co-workers during my internship with the Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies (IWES). You could tell each of the Media Advocates for Prevention (M.A.P.) youth were carefully deciding who they were going to choose. Over the last five weeks Coti and I had facilitated trainings for the new peer advocates in the M.A.P. program. They had learned about HIV and STI awareness, transmission, and prevention. They had also learned about creating and editing scripts based on real life experiences, as well as collecting and making footage and then making a film to be used as an outreach tool. However they had not been faced with such a question yet. Like me, they were barely beginning their quest to understand the real meaning of effective HIV and STI prevention.

“Well, can it be someone from my neighborhood?” asked Nelly, the youngest one in the group. “Because there’s this lady that comes around once in while and she sits down with us and asks us about our life- you know- like school and stuff. She’s always trying to see if there’s anything she can do to make things better.” As the words were coming out of her mouth, I couldn’t help but to remember the focus groups and work groups I had helped develop and organize for the Youth of Color (Y.O.C.) Taskforce. This IWES program empowered youth by allowing them to express what they believe their needs are when it comes to effective HIV prevention programs and services. The

* All youth members’ names have been changed.
focus and work groups we carried out with youth (defined as those between the ages of 13 and 24 by the CDC) from different cultural, ethnic, and academic backgrounds, as well as different employment and housing situations. Many rich ideas and arguments were brought forth by the youth. These suggestions are being used by the Y.O.C. Taskforce to create an HIV prevention protocol to be implemented in the state of Louisiana. Like the lady Nelly spoke about, we took our time to listen to what the youth have to say in order to improve the current situation in the state.

“Sure, Nelly that’s a good example of a leader,” said Tom, one of the older teens in the group. “Ms. Coti, may I use the computer real quick? I want to look up somebody that I saw in the news the other day. Everything worthwhile is bound to appear in the internet.” He was right. It’s amazing how the internet has become so essential in our everyday life. That is why, along with the Administrative Assistant at IWES, I helped re-design the Institute’s website. We made it more user friendly for youth and women of color, the populations with whom we worked the most. Articles developed by IWES, as well as our programs, events, and contact information will all be easily found throughout the web next week, when the site will officially go live for anyone to access it.

As I had mentioned in my progress report, accessibility is a key factor in all of IWES’s projects. Furthermore, at IWES we strive to take into consideration anything that might make people from different backgrounds be able to understand and approach us. There are many influential variables that affect how individuals understand and react to issues on mental and sexual health. Whether these variables affect individuals implicitly (i.e., different education levels) or explicitly (i.e., the repercussion of Hurricane Katrina), they do play a determining role in individuals. When the staff wants to research the
background and information necessary for the understanding of a variable, they access
the information database I created during the summer, which contains recent articles,
publications, and reviews on numerous items. “There you go, it’s that easy to get to these
people,” Tom said once he found what he was looking for. I smiled. Whether it takes the
form of a “Google search” or an information database, to know that I played a part
making sure IWES’s projects are accessible gives me great satisfaction.

“Check it out, somebody added us in MySpace,” Nada pointed out. “You guys,” I
interrupted, “have you already decided on your leaders?” “Well,” Michelle responded, “I
already decided the next spots where I’ll do outreach- damn that place is hot!” The
MySpace page I developed (accessed through myspace.com/map_nola) for the M.A.P.
program, known to sometimes take over the youth’s attention, has been a successful
cyber networking tool. Many youth from New Orleans are able to see several M.A.P.
movies, as well as meet several of the peer advocates of the program. Given we live in a
very fast paced world, it was great to have a simple way of communicating with folks
from around the city.

“Is that where the Red Event is going down?” Tina asked. “I think my boy is
going with a couple of friends. When is it again?” The Red Tent Events, a series of
mental wellness events for those seeking to soothe their minds and souls after the turmoil
brought by Hurricane Katrina, have been widely embraced by locals. “The one for men
will be held on September 7th,” I clarified. The first event, organized exclusively for
women, was held on the levee by the Ninth Ward, an area infamous for the amount of
destruction suffered due to Katrina. There were several tents decorated with flowers,
flowing red fabric, and incense, setting a soothing mood and allowing the women to truly
relax. The next event, organized exclusively for men, will be held in the well known Sweet Lorraine’s Jazz Club. Being part of New Orleans for over 30 years, this club has been noted as one of the top ten jazz clubs in the country by USA Today. The venue will create a relaxed and comfortable space for men to come and share their experiences - from the incidents that made them stronger to those that shook their confidence, while assuring a safe space for all.

“That’s cool. But when will the event for youth be?” asked Nelly. “That’s the one I want to go to.” “That should be around the last week of October,” I said. “On Halloween?” she asked, her eyes wide open in disbelief. “No, a couple of days before; probably on the 26th.” Even over two months prior to the event, the youth were already anxious for the Red Tent Event that will be exclusively for youth. “Ok, given we’ve digressed a little bit, I’m guessing y’all have already decided which leader you’ll talk about,” I said. The youth nodded and settled down at the big conference table once more.

“Alright, who wants to go first?” asked Coti. As they double checked either in their notes or in their minds what they would be saying, some sipped their brightly colored plastic cups filled with soda; others savored the brownies we had brought that afternoon. “Ok, I’ll go first,” Danny said, and with that we started going around the table. One by one, the youth expressed who they thought were real leaders. “Look at my man Denzel here,” Danny said while holding a magazine up with Denzel Washington on the cover, “you can see his determination. He even helped with the Boys and Girls Clubs, didn’t he?” “Well, I went way back,” said Michelle. “My leader is MLK. He was credible and intelligent, and he brought hope to us.” Tina raised both her arms and shook her head, as if she were about to praise the lord, and said:
“Alright, alright. You know I have to give some rep to my momma. I have never met anyone so industrious.” They each took turns, giving their take on leadership.

Lilly, one of the most outgoing teens in the group, had been lost in her thoughts for most of the discussion. Her trip down memory lane must have brought her back to some good times - she smiled to herself and rolled her eyes. Lilly and I had clicked from the very beginning. She was affable, savvy, and very bright - but she didn’t know it. She was the epitome of a child full of potential that was never given the opportunity to shine. The rollercoaster of emotions and experiences she called life had been nothing short of tumultuous. Yet one could tell she strived to make things better. The falls in her life had been because of bad decisions she was never told were poorly made.

“What, I’m the only one left to speak?” Lilly asked. “Alright then. My leader is Ms. Akira.” I almost dropped my cup to the floor. Had I heard correctly? Did she just choose me as her leader? “She’s smart, she’s studying to be a lawyer and a doctor, and she dresses really hot.” We all laughed at her witty response. “It’s true!” she said. “So dressing hot makes her a leader?” Coti asked her. “Among other things,” Lilly answered smiling. “To be honest, what makes her a leader is the fact I could talk to her about anything, and I know she’ll have my back.”

I couldn’t help to blush. Simple and to the point, the honesty in her words resonated in my head. I still remember vividly every time she approached me to ask for advice. I never judged or reproach her, even though many times I did not agree with her actions. I took my time to make sure she knew how much she was worth. In the words of Lauren Hill, I had come across a gem who though she was only a hard rock. If there’s anything I made sure Lilly learned, it was self-respect. “You can do whatever you want,”
I vividly remember telling her as we walked to the streetcar together after one of the trainings. “If it’s your life, then the decisions should be made by you. However, always keep in mind how precious you are. If you don’t give yourself respect, nobody will; so make sure you always look out for yourself.”

I knew my advice had gotten to her that day, but I hadn’t realized to what extent my words had infiltrated into her mind until the last day of training. When the group was getting ready to break for lunch, she took my aside and said “You would’ve been proud of me last weekend.” Her ex-boyfriend had come over to her house and was trying to have sex with her. Before she didn’t give much thought as to whom she was sleeping with, after all she was on the pill. However, over the last couple of months, and after an STI false alarm, she realized the importance of always wearing a condom. More importantly, she had recently realized not everyone deserved somebody as amazing as her. She told me she did not have sex with her ex-boyfriend that weekend—she valued herself enough to make the right decision. And boy was she ever glad, it turned out he was dating someone at the time.

I had been proud of her decision, and delighted to know she was starting to realize what a precious gem she was (sapphire, she clarified on the last day we saw each other). I felt so… fulfilled, knowing I had played a small part in Lilly’s new optimistic way of life.

“Ms. Akira! Why are you getting red?!” Lilly asked smiling. To which Tony said: “I think she just needs another brownie. Here, I’ll get one for you… and two for me.” Danielle got tense as she attempted to protect the plate of brownies from Tony and said: “Oh you did not just take almost all my brownies.” I smiled. “Nah, I just realized
something, that’s all” I assured them. “What?” Nada asked. “You can’t just stop there. This is the last day we have with you- you have to tell us all the juicy details now.”

How could I explain to them what was going through my mind? Even though there’s still a lot to be done in the sexual and mental health fields, I had just realized it’s the small actions- like making a lesson on self value and respect an everyday conversation- the type of change we need. That is the true meaning of effective HIV and STI prevention: assuring emotional and mental wellbeing amongst individuals from all walks of life. We can’t force people to change who they are or what they do. We can only let them know what other options they have, and we don’t even have to be obvious about it.

Over the summer, I learned a lot from the projects in which I’ve been involved, but I learned even more from the staff I worked with and the youth I’ve met. The most valuable lessons I learned were from the people surrounding me. They never noticed they were my incognito teachers, and until recently I didn’t notice I was their student. But I learned nonetheless- the same ways others might be able to learn through incognito teachers around the globe.

When I decided to apply to be a RRASC intern, I was determined to make a difference, I wanted to catalyze change. Little did I know, the change I would hold most dear to my heart forever, is the one a 17 year old young woman made after listening to my advice.

I smiled at the group. “Well… let’s just say… this won’t be the last time you see me.”