When I was placed at the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) for my RRASC internship, I thought, “Great! I live in New York City, so I’ll be living at home and I’ll be able to work on issues directly affecting me and my life.” I wasn’t wrong. Although I was interning through Hampshire College’s Reproductive Rights Activist Service Corps, one look at NYCLU’s website can tell you that reproductive rights is one of many civil liberty issues that NYCLU works on. In fact, I was able to work on a variety of projects, including helping plan NYCLU’s presence at the city-wide Gay Pride Parade, helping with the judging of NYCLU’s Freedom of Expression contest, attending protests for Immigration rights, and creating three lesson modules for NYCLU’s Teen Health Initiative.

NYCLU’s reproductive rights project is just that, RRP; a program founded by NYCLU’s executive director, Donna Lieberman. The Reproductive Rights Project is the only New York State-based legal organization that focuses on reproductive rights. In this project is the Teen Health Initiative, where I was placed for my internship.

The Teen Health Initiative was founded in 1997 as a resource for young adults and teens in New York City. The Teen Health Initiative is made up of middle and high school students (many of which are from New York City public schools) who are trained through our program on healthcare and sexual health issues. Many of the high school students are hired as Peer Educators who facilitate workshops conducted in schools and
in youth-based organizations around the city on confidential healthcare available to
minors in New York State. Karyn Brownson, the director of the Teen Health Initiative,
assists in these workshops, if she isn’t conducting them herself. The Teen Health
Initiative trains 1,000 healthcare providers each year and reaches over 1,100 teens during
these Know Your Rights workshops. The Teen Health Initiative is one way of educating
youth and empowering them to take on leadership roles in this important cause.

My favorite part of working for the Teen Health Initiative was that although most of my work wasn’t entirely reproductive rights orientated, the Teen Health Initiative is a big part of the Reproductive Rights Project and I always felt part of the project that was fighting these social justice issues. Our bi-weekly Reproductive Rights Project meetings were very inspirational because while you don’t see the direct effects of NYCLU’s work every day, hearing what people are working on reminds you that you are a part of a bigger movement, a bigger coalition that is doing just the work that needs to be done.

NYCLU’s Minors’ Rights to Confidential Healthcare workshop focuses on the right of all minors in New York State to reproductive, mental, substance abuse, and emergency healthcare. The workshop explains that some minors, those who are pregnant or parenting, married, in the armed services, or emancipated, have full access to confidential healthcare without their parents’ permission. However, the majority of teens who don’t fall into that category still have rights to healthcare. The Teen Health Initiative makes clear that we don’t encourage teens to not tell their parents about important decisions and health-related issues, but that New York State law implements a “safety net” for those teens who don’t live in peaceful and understanding households where these kinds of conversations can take place.
As the weeks at NYCLU passed, I got more familiar with The Teen Health Initiative’s workshops. Early on, I assisted only by being a nodding head when Karyn make an important point. There came a point when I had to go to an early meeting in New York’s Chinatown to present the concept of our workshop to a Summer Youth Employment site so we can conduct the workshop to their youth. Previously, one of my projects entailed me researching all the Summer Youth sites and sending letters via email and postal mail asking if we can present to their summer youth. This site requested more information from a live person during their meeting. Nervous, but confident, I was able to explain our workshop in detail and answer questions about our work.

Towards the end of my internship, I was able to actively assist in the workshops by facilitating the role-plays we have to help familiarize the teens with definitions (informed consent, confidentiality, and healthcare provider), their right to confidential STD testing, and the rights of pregnant teens in public schools.

By working for NYCLU, I had the awesome opportunity to visit panels on HIV education, sit in on Sex Education Alliance of New York City meetings, and NYCLU’s weekly brown bags. These get-togethers were very informative and I’m very happy I was able to attend them. During my third week, I went to the Young Women of Color HIV/AIDS Coalition's Young Women of Color of Caribbean Descent and HIV conference, which was amazing, extremely inspirational, and eye-opening in a way that confirmed that I want HIV/AIDS work in my future! There were many guest speakers and panelists that highlighted the struggle and strength of women in America with Caribbean descent. This was, by far, my favorite conference because it took an issue I’m familiar with and brought it to a new level, a specific people, and really educated me on
something I thought I knew lots about.

During my internship, many changes occurred at NYCLU. This summer, lots of staff resigned, moved to a different organization, or went to law school. The Reproductive Rights Project disbanded, and the Teen Health Initiative was transferred to the Advocacy department. The Teen Health Initiative website was remade. And many progressive laws were passed. It was a pretty successful summer for NYCLU. The Teen Health Initiative website used to be a simple aesthetically unpleasing site that looked like it was made for young children, though full of information they wouldn’t be able to use. My contribution to the remodeling of the Teen Health Initiative’s website was the updating of the website’s Current Events and Online Resources sections. I went through the old website’s resources and confirmed the contact information and URL were correct and added new resources that Kayrn suggested. For the current events, Alberto, NYCLU’s Communication Assistant, sent out daily to weekly news emails that were relevant to NYCLU’s work. I assembled a list of these news articles that would be of interest to the teens visiting the Teen Health Initiative website.

As part of the process of reorganizing the Teen Health Initiative’s online presence, one of my projects included connecting with other New York State youth-based organizations on Facebook. I continued a previously started research project to gather Facebook groups and fan pages. I logged into the Teen Health Initiative Facebook page and requested to join the groups and “like” the fan pages. Prior to this, I created an excel worksheet with all the groups and their contact information. I called those organizations that provided phone numbers, and emailed those that provided email addresses. I contacted the organizations to ask them about working together with their youth so we
can get the Teen Health Initiative’s important information to more of New York’s youth.

The majority of my time at NYCLU was spent working on my biggest project of the summer, the Teen Health Initiative lesson modules. Karyn and I decided that I should create a series of lesson plans based on LGBT issues because the Teen Health Initiative students expressed interest in learning more about them. I used resources such as GLSEN, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, and Advocates for Youth to create a 45-page lesson module to be used in the Teen Health Initiative meetings. This lesson module is an introduction to the lives of LGBT persons; from understanding sexual orientation to the struggles they face, from how to be a straight ally to the difference between transsexuals and transgender people.

Following the completion of “Intro 2 LGBT,” I created a lesson module about college readiness. Using my personal experience and that of which I gained from College Summit, along with resources from the College Board and the Common Application, I created a 23-page “Intro 2 College,” which covers college essays, standardized testing, and financial aid. It’s paired with a PowerPoint presentation on the common application.

Lastly, we decided that it would be a good idea to have a lesson module on drugs and illegal substances. Mirroring NYCLU’s official position on drugs, the lessons focus not on discouraging drugs and inducing fear, but mainly on harm reduction and educational information. I split the list of drugs we created into three PowerPoint presentations, one for each category we created: common drugs, including marijuana and alcohol; drugs taken orally, including LSD and Ecstasy; and drugs taken by a variety of methods, including heroin and cocaine. Thus, “Intro 2 Substances.”

Each lesson module contains an activity or quiz for mostly each lesson. These
activities vary from pairing college prep tips with its appropriate month on the seasonal calendar, to a game of Jeopardy with the oral drugs. I had a real blast creating these lessons and their corresponding activities. These modules took a long tome to create, but they will be a major asset to the Teen Health Initiative next year.

I really appreciated the uniqueness of my internship. Most of the time, I was sitting in a conference room with a bunch of legal interns from law schools all over the east coast. NYCLU hires a lot of interns during the summer and they are split up into the different departments in NYCLU: advocacy, RRP, communications, etc. However, I was the only intern in RRP who wasn’t a legal intern, and I had the specialty of the Teen Health Initiative. So my position at NYCLU was a very unique one and I had the privilege of working with the Teen Health Initiative, the students, and Karyn.