During the summer of 2009 I was an intern at Women with a Vision in New Orleans. This was an experience which created a lot of stress, awareness, and learning for me, and has led me to gain a deeper understanding of the way organizations work. Women with a Vision is very much a grassroots organization. It was founded about 20 years ago by Catherine Haywood and Danita Muse, both of whom I had the opportunity to meet and work with. It started off as an outreach based organization and has transitioned (and is continuing to make the transition) into advocacy. WWAV centers itself around serving poor black women in the greater New Orleans area, and paying attention to the most underserved amongst them (sex workers, at risk youth, women being cycled through the criminal justice system, etc.). The current executive director, Deon Haywood, is the daughter of one of the founders. Being at WWAV brought me to a lot of firsts; my first time being in the South, my first time working with a women’s health/reproductive justice organization, and my first experience working as an outsider within a community-based organization. All of these firsts came as a complete surprise to me and forced me to accept challenges, challenge myself, and grow. I was able to design interview questions for women with incarcerated partners and for women affected by the Crimes Against Nature Laws, work on building a workshop, be a part of grant finding and writing processes, participate in planning and carrying out a large coalition building meeting, attended the southern conference of the National AIDS Fund, and really see - up close - what goes into making a very small non-profit work, and work well.

When I first learned of the RRASC program I was immediately struck by the fact that these internships are meant to place students into internships with such a broad range of programs. As I read through all of the types of work – advocacy, outreach, research, direct service, etc – I began to really think about where I saw myself as fitting into the conversation of reproductive rights. I had experience
working with community outreach and I had a general knowledge that I wanted to work with communities of color (specifically black communities and immigrant communities). I also knew that my main focus during my time at Hampshire College has been and will be with the plan to someday take part in outreach work. While my initial leanings were towards a legal perspective, I am glad that I was placed where I was, because structurally, Women with a Vision was a more familiar space for me, a very grassroots and on the ground style approach, with limited funds. However, this also allowed me to encounter and confront challenges I had encountered somewhat to a lesser extent in previous work, head on. This included frustration with the type of work I was doing and understanding the financial constraints of the program while still wishing they weren't there.

The major aspect of Women with a Vision which caught my eye was the concept harm reduction, the act of helping women live better from where they are located now. This focus on the now, and the reality of the lives of the population you are seeking to help is a piece I always thought was missing from a lot of community outreach, there is too often a culture of being willing to help a population, so long as they conform to your idea of how they ought to live, think, and behave. Deon made it clear to me during my first couple of days that Women with a Vision was not one of those organizations, she told me the focus is on harm reduction and on a high impact, rather than on telling people how they should be.

I started my work at Women with a Vision during the launch of a collaboration with CHAMP's Project UNSHACKLE called No Justice! This collaboration became the center of my time in New Orleans and allowed me to learn a lot more than I had expected to about the way our court systems work and how laws are made, enforced, and can target specific groups. No Justice! centers around the issue of the unjust sentencing and punitive action taken against sex workers charged under the “Crimes Against Nature” laws. These laws are in place to enforce the illegality of any sexual acts deemed to be “crimes against nature” - in this case the act is oral sex. Any sex worker who is charged with soliciting oral sex can be charged with this crime and the offense goes from a misdemeanor (soliciting, a fine and
possible 6 months in jail) to a felony charge (Crime Against Nature, possibility of 5 years in prison). Conviction under this law also results in becoming a registered felon and sex offender. All of the same restrictions placed on those convicted of rape or child molestation are placed on these sex workers, registration requirements which are supposedly in place to protect communities from being preyed on by dangerous sex offenders are being used on a group which is already at risk and marginalized. This law affects mainly poor women of color who are already struggling with the revolving door of the criminal justice system as well as drug and alcohol problems. This conviction adds to their list of life obstacles 1) a 10 year sex offender label - which consists of the words “sex offender” under your picture on your driver's license, 2) a requirement that with each move you make you reregister and send out a notice of your offender status, and 3) the loss of any federal money including but not limited to, food stamps, Section 8 housing, or even Federal student loans or grants. The implications of a felony charge are far reaching and the stigma of a sex offender label makes an effort to find alternative sources of income even closer to impossible. No Justice! seeks to ultimately get rid of the 203-year-old law and is currently in the coalition building stages to raise awareness and gain widespread support. The first hand stories of the women who are affected are some of the most powerful coalition building tools at hand. Seeing the driver's license of a girl my age, with sex offender boldly stamped in red under her smiling 19 year old face, and knowing that due to being convicted twice she would spend the next 20 years of her life branded as a sex offender was the most powerful piece to understand the predatory nature of this law. I spent a great deal of time during the first half of my internship informing myself about the law and how it was affecting people, as well as preparing for the first coalition building meeting.

One of my main tasks at WWAV was to create a holistic vaginal health workshop/lesson plan, with the intention to carry it out before I left at the end of the ten weeks. My supervisor assigned this task to me on the first day and it was basically an on going project through out the summer. About half way through my time in New Orleans, it become apparent that there would not be a time for me to
actually conduct the lesson plan I had been working on. In the time I had been at WWAV there had not been any workshops or Our Space (a WWAV program which does group check in meetings, movie nights, and self esteem workshops) meeting. I knew that this had a lot to do with the timing of my internship, in terms of where WWAV was financially, logistically, and with their focus on trying to launch No Justice! with Project UNSHACKLE. This realization was very disappointing for me. As invested as I was in our work with No Justice/Project UNSHACKLE, I felt as if I wouldn't be able to see my long term task to completion and began to struggle with having gone into the internship thinking there would be a lot more hands on outreach involved. The simple timing of my internship made a huge difference in the type of work I did and what my day-to-day work looked like. A huge part of the focus while I was there was on raising funds (searching for, discussing, and applying for grants) and No Justice!, so around this time I had a hard time locating myself in the work I was doing. It was a struggle for me to reassure myself that the work I was doing would be relevant, and that it would all come together in the end. Luckily it was around this time in my internship that everything else I was involved in really kicked into high gear.

Laura McTighe from CHAMP (our partner in the No Justice! campaign) came to New Orleans to facilitate the first meeting between Women with a Vision and the other allied organizations in the area we had identified as members of the coalition. The planning for this meeting finally culminating did wonders to reassure me, and meeting and speaking to other organizers was a wonderful experience. The meeting itself was one of the most interesting and engaging days I spent in New Orleans. Facts and figures I had been looking at for weeks were being presented in an effective, moving way, and I was able to watch this information being received. Just before the meeting took place, we were contacted by a lawyer from the New Orleans Public Defenders office who was interested in helping with the fight against these laws, and his presence definitely made a big difference in the meeting. We were able to exchange information in a way which was extremely informative and showed how important an issue it was that we were undertaking. All of the allies called to the meeting seemed to be very passionate
about being a part of this coalition, and the meeting wrapped up with everyone stating the work they
would specifically contribute, and there seemed to be a solid and committed coalition in place. It was
inspiring to see how the pieces of the coalition would make the goals of No Justice! seem well within
reach.

My other big task at Women with a Vision was to come up with an interview to gather
information from women who had been affected by the Crimes Against Nature law. I needed to
structure a set of questions we could use as a guideline during our interviews which would allow us to
get the information necessary to most accurately frame their experiences. Having written out the
questions and then seeing the affect the first hand written account of the experience which was read out
loud during the coalition building meeting had, I suggested that a recording of these interviews would
have the largest impact and would best communicate the reality of the situation. We did carry out a
couple of the interviews while I was in my last week in New Orleans, and we saw that having to write
as we spoke to the women detracted from the conversation; they will most likely move towards
recording the interviews instead.

Overall my internship at Women with a Vision was a rewarding, challenging, and eye opening
experience. The people at WWAV were immediately welcoming to me, and made my transition into a
new and unfamiliar space easier through their openness and honesty. I learned in a real sense what
social justice looks like, and how to go about setting goals and pursuing them. I also learned how to
confront my own frustrations with the lack of immediacy in my work. I found I needed to remind
myself that it wasn't about me simply feeling I had wrapped something up, rather it was about having
contributed to something which would make a real difference. My co-worker put it best at one point,
after she told me very honestly about the struggles she's had in her own work and asked me how my
stay in New Orleans was going. She told me it is imperative to remind yourself that sometimes,
someone needs to do the 'unsexy work' in order to make a real and tangible impact. That is something I
am continuing to learn, and WWAV made me see just how far reaching and real that kind of work can
I would advise any future interns to maintain an open line of communication. Having spoken to my supervisor before my internship was key in aiding in my transition (she helped me secure housing which I could actually afford) and in enhancing my understanding of what the organization was all about. I would also suggest that interns make sure they get out and take in the area they are in, especially if it is very different from where they are from. WWAV interns should make sure they are verbal and open to asking for clarification and are comfortable with non-traditional hours, a family-like atmosphere, and a great deal of independent work.