In applying to CLPP for a RRASC internship at Helping Individual Prostitutes Survive (HIPS), I did not realize how radically my life would be altered, how essentially aspects of my perception would be reversed, remolded and renewed. My time at HIPS will always be remembered fondly as an experience of many firsts: my first summer in the United States, my first time living in DC, my first time working in public policy and reproductive rights… my first summer above the legal age of drinking. 😊

The first time I walked into the HIPS office was after-hours on the day before I was to start officially. I just wanted to check out the new space. That evening, I met a lady I would find to be one of HIPS’ most dedicated, longest serving, hardest working staff… Billie Taylor. She was working overtime that day, asked impromptu to organize a group session for the volunteers of HIPS’ Outreach Program. She showed me where everything was while I walked around with her, helping her set up, telling me about what HIPS does, before giving me a warm hug and saying it would be great to see me the next day. Not even started yet, I left that evening with a huge grin on my face; I was sure I would love it there.
I came in the next day for my first day at work, in a job that would turn out to be so rewarding and as challenging as it was gratifying. It was not so difficult to transition into the HIPS way of things because everything was so clear, and the helpful staff was there to make everything simple. My supervisor, Gigi Thomas, can only be done justice by being described as a force to be reckoned with. I was daily amazed by her strength and energy. We had a meeting to define my role in the office and go over the basics of time and schedules. After she took me around doing the introductions, Angel, such a beautiful woman inside and out, showed me to my desk. That first day was a whirlwind of learning how to work the phones, the office copier and the ancient air conditioner, and when I finally settled down, it was to read a packet on the work I would be involved in… the place called HIPS.

HIPS' mission since 1993, when it was formed by community and police representatives, has been to assist female, male, and transgender individuals engaging in sex work in Washington, DC in leading healthier lives. Utilizing a harm reduction model, HIPS' programs strive to address the impact that HIV/AIDS, STIs, discrimination, poverty, violence and drug use have on the lives of individuals engaging in sex work.

HIPS reaches over 100 sex workers each night during outreach and makes over 8,000 contacts every year. Over 4,500 of those contacts are with youth under 24. The majority of HIPS' contacts are made through the mobile outreach program. Three nights a week, from 9:00pm until 5:00am, HIPS works to build positive relationships with sex workers on the street through active listening, consistent outreach and unconditional support. I had two very impacting sessions of training for 'The Van': Syringe use and Isms... This was more enlightening than I could have ever expected, and with each of those evening
classes, I made some unforgettable friends and got closer to being 'prepared' for ‘The Van Experience’, where a bunch of us would go out to the streets during the nights, doing syringe exchange, counseling, or handing out free condoms, lube, food, candy, hugs and smiles to prostitutes. I was a bit disappointed that I came in too late in the year to graduate with the class that has been training for outreach but I settled for an individual training which Billie let me do, so I could complete the mandatory hours to start taking our work and contributions to the streets (when the streets won't come to us).

HIPS’ counseling and referral program provides services ranging from obtaining a legitimate ID card to finding emergency shelter for young people fleeing abusive relationships. HIPS 24-hour hotline provides counseling and referrals to anyone in or affected by prostitution or sex work. Hotline counselors also answer health questions or support parents whose sons or daughters are engaged in sex work. Hotline activity was characterized by lulls and rushes, and Gigi gave me some helpful tips on how to successfully navigate both scenarios. She also helped me work my way through the feelings of impotence that you tend to get when you take a call from a client who is far away who you cannot help, or who lives in areas you know nothing about - say in a remote part of California, for example. We tried to keep updated information and resource guides at HIPS to be able to refer our callers and/or clients from areas outside DC to places where they can get free condoms, HIV testing, counseling and LGBTQ-friendly medical attention. However, sometimes we get that one call from a client who needs us and we are not able to do more than just talk, or point them to the web with all its intricacies and unsorted information, and those are the ones after which you get the helpless feeling, and the overwhelming desire to be some sort of Superman.

Working on the Hotline gave me the opportunity to help our callers, and there is no doubt that it did good things for my listening skills, articulation and quick thinking. ... My work called on me to find a
balance between compassion and confidence, empathy and resourcefulness. Social work seems to require quite a bit of all four, and it's been nice raising them to the surface of my everyday interactions at HIPS. I am being called on more and more to come out of myself and show courage and confidence... none of that shyness can float in the office. ;)

HIPS Foot Patrol addresses the HIV prevention and health needs of an especially marginalized population: young men on the street. All of our services provided comprehensive, unconditional support, utilizing harm reduction models to assist youth and adults on the street to identify the skills they need or already have to make healthier life choices for themselves.¹

The syringe exchange program, run by Billie, constitutes many of our clients turning up with several used needles to exchange for new and therefore safer syringes. The health message is getting through the barriers to the streets and more and more people are becoming aware that they have as much control as they allow themselves over their health and well being. The safer the choices we make, the more prevention we can foster every 9 and a half minutes (currently in DC, every nine and a half minutes, a new case of HIV is coming up!).

The clothing closet in our organization got some substantial donations too, which were very much needed by some of the new clients as well as some of the old. HIPS accepts donations, from clothes to make up to shoes and bags... the generosity of the DC community sustains the less privileged among them, and makes life a little easier for them. God bless all our donors!

Finally, there were several groups that we had organized for our clients: Quickies, beauty school, trade school, and then the more specific Men’s Support Group, Women’s Support Group and the Trans-Support Group. We educated everyone that came onto our radar how to use the knowledge, as well as

¹ A lot of the information, I adapted from my HIPS info packet and the HIPS website (www.HIPS.org)
the free condoms, dams and syringes we gave them to make positive impacts on their health and daily lives.

The HIPS office was quietly busy, slowly but surely getting things done. The rest of the crew was amazing, quite the characters each of them: Gigi, my supervisor, whose confidence is like nothing I have ever seen before- I love it; Cyndee and Charisse, Lamont and Carmen, J.D and Angel, both Elizabeths, Sarah and Debbie, Charmus, and Natalie, my fellow intern. In the beginning, I did not have much participation in the sessions because I basically was still ill prepared, green, wet behind the ears…. This changed over time and my contributions began to get more and more substantial.

I would also do a bit of the intern-y stuff: filing, copying, scanning and the like, but even that was interesting. I know it will be useful at my on-campus job next academic year.

For a long time, I kept messing up with one thing or other, and I had also been having trouble remembering the pronouns of choice of some of our staff and clients. I do not take for granted the difference that making a person feel comfortable can make for the kind of work we were involved in. That aside, it was easy to feel that you were part of a family here at HIPS; which was a good thing because it made up for the clients who could be nicer but weren't, and for the threats we got from disgruntled clients. Work at HIPS is very sensitive and personal, and we always had to find a balance between work and reaching out.

The overriding characteristic of HIPS’ work and objectives was the hands-on, interactive nature of each call to service. The group sessions we organized for each week always demanded of us an open mind, quick thinking and a call to empathetic sensitivity to each of our clients and their stories. The group socials were also a special highlight for me. Organizing them was always a great time of bonding for all of us at the office as we prepared dishes, made flyers, and thought up games to keep the events upbeat.
and fun. Streamlining plans for transportation, food, gifts and tokens was helpful in honing my event planning skills, and I only got better at multi-tasking. As a family, we also celebrated each other’s birthdays with potlucks and cards, and threw a farewell when Sarah, our intern from Americorps, had to leave. When one of our volunteers at HIPS finally came back after a battle with abscesses and poor health, it was nice to have him back because he had been very kind to me with my transition into the HIPS family and the HIPS way of thinking. I was happy to see him restored to full charge of his faculties, and we all paid attention when he gave us a sobering talk about the importance of harm reduction, and its relevance to public health not just for the clients we took in but also for ourselves and the people in our lives outside work. Personally, it is (pleasantly) surprising how much more health conscious I became this summer, in part because of the group sessions and casual conversations I had with my workmates. There were sad moments as well, for example when one of our clients was shot and lost his life, or when police arrested two other clients on theft charges. It was always such a balm to get surprise calls though, from clients just calling to say they were glad we exist and that they appreciate the work we do. That was always a very rewarding, very satisfying feeling. During my fourth week, I was even more appreciative of my life following the MetroRail accident, which was a train that my colleague, Charisse and I only missed because we stayed in at work longer than we had planned. The universe is not yet done with us and God is watching over us.

Losing Sarah (the Americorps intern) to the DC clinic created the opportunity for me to involve myself even more with the clients at HIPS. Even with less than a month left at HIPS, I was working with the permanent staff and got involved in organizing some more events to: 1) raise funds for HIPS services, 2) educate the wider community on issues affecting HIPS clients, 3) increase visibility of HIPS, and 4)
convene HIPS clients, staff, volunteers, supporters, allies and the wider community in a fun, positive environment.

Values Clarification was the theme of most of the work we did in July. In an effort to create dialogue among different groups and to do some myth busting, I decided to make out some questionnaires on values clarification on prostitutes and transgendered people. This was very eye opening work, because in the first place, I was at liberty to use material outside my own familiarity, and so I was able to talk to colleagues and friends outside the HIPS family. The issues were very well taken and thoroughly explored, but no doubt that even though people (some of my friends, even!) may have reservations about groups that identify outside what they consider as 'right' or 'normal', there is a call to justice, and the acknowledgement that human rights apply to everyone, regardless of age, race, sexual orientation and job description.

Because we used a harm reduction model at HIPS, our focus was not so much on stopping the people who walked through our doors from doing what they do… instead we try to make a difference in how they do what they do. Shall we deny someone the chance to learn how to use a condom, or negotiate safer sex, or inject hormones or even drugs safely because we do not understand why they do what they do? Shall we shift the counseling conversation we start with a client from concerns about being pregnant to a high-horse declaration that she should not be engaging in sex work in the first place? At HIPS, the answer is no. In interacting with our clients, I cannot even start to describe how completely the veil of ignorance that had covered my eyes for so long was lifted. When a prostitute walks up to you, his/ her mind is not so focused on ‘making some change’ that she does not care about how she is treated. The sex worker is a human being before she is a sex worker. When she is insulted, she hurts same way as the next woman. When a man takes her brutally or refuses to use protection, it injures her health and comes
with as much risk as it would if that was done to anyone’s mother or sister. Rape should be considered rape if it is rape; it shouldn’t matter if the victim is a prostitute or a nun. It should be abhorred and punished just as seriously. Some of the results of the research we used in the training were alarming; they caught my attention and stayed with me long after I had clocked out of work. It is hard to take in how much we have been blind to the plight of the transgender community, as well as all those involved in sex work. The important lesson that I am learning, and that I have heard myself say to friends and strangers alike when they ask biased questions about my work, is that 'If you make the decision to judge, you have the duty and the responsibility to know all the sides of the story.' When a transgendered woman needs to use the bathroom, she needs to use a bathroom. The dramatics behind whether she is woman enough or man enough pale in the light of her need to answer nature’s call! The time should be taken to reform policy, and make new policy and legislation to accommodate transgendered people. You cannot choose to grow a flower garden, and then let it be overrun by weeds and thorn bushes. It is just not done! To do that is an injustice and a call to shame.

I feel like nothing academic really prepared me for my HIPS experience. Social justice and reproductive rights did not feature very clearly in my scope of learning, and yet now, while I remain (eternally) interested in economics and international relations (read borderless politics), I feel like there has been a new branch in my passions and calling in public policy as well. I feel like I have new eyes to the once unapparent connection between social justice and politics. Also, there is no doubt that reproductive rights, upheld and sought more in the United States than in any other place I have been, ties in and intersects with social justice.

To future interns: prepare yourself physically, mentally, emotionally, for whatever internship you find yourself in. Don’t waste a single day steeped in timidity, self-doubt or fear. Like Mary Lyon said, ‘Jump
in, you may ride very fast!’ The days will fly by, and you’ll be sorry you didn’t emerge from your cocoon sooner! Don’t miss a thing – be a sponge, remain optimistic and allow yourself to learn, learn, learn!

My time at HIPS was a period of great learning, great fun, and great self-discovery. I feel that it was beneficial to me as a woman, a college kid, and an individual member of the world. Before I started, I thought it would just be an interesting time, a way to make money through summer, or a constructive distraction. I did not know what I was getting myself into. And what a good thing it was!

**prostitute**  
*['prəs-ə-tyüt, -"tyüt]*  
: A strong woman, with an extra ordinary story. A survivor.