This summer, I interned at the New York Civil Liberties Union, in the Teen Health Initiative. It was a great experience, and one that I am truly grateful for. As with everything in life, there were many ups and downs, but I learned a lot and the experience as a whole was really rewarding. The New York Civil Liberties Union is the New York affiliate of the national organization the American Civil Liberties Union, and works to protect people’s civil rights across a huge spectrum of issues. It was really exciting to be surrounded by so many different, yet interconnected, social justice campaigns that NYCLU was working on at the same time. Everyday, there were people working on issues ranging from police brutality, racial profiling, LGBT rights, military recruitment of students, and reproductive rights (just to name a few) and I was working among people in a variety of positions - community organizers, lawyers, and other interns.

I specifically interned with the Teen Health Initiative (THI), which is part of the Reproductive Rights Project (RRP) of NYCLU. THI works to educate both youth and health care providers about minors’ rights to accessing confidential health care in New York State, which includes reproductive health care, and some types of mental, substance abuse, and emergency care. THI does this primarily through youth oriented presentations for schools and youth groups, and professional presentations for health care providers. In the very beginning of my internship, my supervisor had me start off by reading through the presentations that they do, which was a good introduction and gave me a good
overview about the work that THI does. Summer is the slower part of the year for presentations, but I accompanied my boss on a couple professional presentations and actually co-presented with her on five youth presentations. I don’t have much experience with public speaking, so it was a pretty new experience for me, but my boss was really encouraging and it turned out to be a lot of fun. We divided the information into two parts and switched off presenting different sections, so it worked out really well.

One of our main projects at THI this summer was revamping the THI website. Our goals were to make it more youth-friendly and update all of the information. Most of the work I did on the website was brainstorming with my boss about how we wanted it to look in terms of color schemes and layout, what information we wanted to revise and how, and who we were aiming to reach out to. I also did a lot of work revising and rewriting a lot of information on the website and researched current articles and news about reproductive and youth rights, especially in New York State. Although the new website didn’t go up while I was still interning, it was exciting and satisfying to feel that I was a part of helping to create something that would last after I would be gone from the organization.

One exciting project that I am really glad I got to complete during my internship was making a short one-minute video of a Hillary Clinton press conference that I filmed and edited. (And it is up on YouTube!) Clinton gave a press conference at Bellevue Hospital in July, as a response to the Health and Human Services draft regulations the Bush Administration released, in attempt to redefine the meaning of abortion to include contraception. The HHS draft regulations were a huge deal that had everyone in the NYCLU office in shock when they came out, and it was really exciting to take on that
project, and especially go to a Hillary Clinton press conference. Filming and editing the
press conference was mostly a project for my own benefit, as a way to learn how to shoot
and edit using Final Cut Pro. I worked with NYCLU’s Communications assistant, who
guided me when it came to editing. I’m really interested in learning more about video,
and this was a great introduction and opportunity that I was really grateful for and had a
lot of fun with. Another video project I was a part of this summer was a video we were
making about the Reproductive Health Act. The Reproductive Health Act is an act that
hopefully will get passed next year, and would basically guarantee women in New York
State the right to have an abortion, no matter what happens on a federal level. We
worked with a freelance filmmaker, with whom we assisted on film shoots to do
interviews. I helped with set up and break down, and was an extra pair of hands if
anything else needed to be done. It was fun to get out of the office and travel to different
parts of the city and hear different perspectives on the RHA and reproductive justice. I
also learned a little bit more about film making, just by observing and being a part of the
project. The video isn’t done yet, but I am excited to see the end product!

Overall, my work at THI was really quite varied. In addition to the bigger
projects we worked on, I also worked on smaller and more consistent tasks such as
fulfilling publication orders and doing research (either online or sometimes at the public
library). Some of the research I did for my supervisor included looking up foster care
agencies for immigrant youth and other youth/teen health organizations in the rest of the
New York State, and contacting the directors of other NY chapters of NYCLU outside of
the city. I also did outreach by tabling at events, including a community block party
event at an organization called 123 Community Space and a Gender Equality Festival put
on by an organization called Girls for Gender Equity. I also represented THI at an Expeditionary Learning Resource Fair at a school in Washington Heights for teachers interested in finding activist programs for their students. Tabling was great; in the beginning it was a little hard because I was talking to people about an organization that I had just begun working with, but as time went on and with the more people I talked to, I found myself becoming more comfortable talking with people about the work that THI and NYCLU do. I enjoyed tabling a lot, because I loved talking with people and feeling that I was making a direct connection with individuals, communities and other organizations. Toward the end of my internship, I was part of a day-long Strategic Planning Retreat for the Reproductive Rights Project, where we talked about the goals, mission, and current and future projects of RRP. It was a little bit hard to navigate the feelings of wanting to be fully invested in giving my input about future goals and projects of RRP when I knew that I would be leaving the organization in about two weeks. However, it was a really valuable experience to be a part of a Strategic Planning retreat and see how an organization literally organizes itself, refocuses on its mission as an organization, and decides what specific issues to work on and how.

Before I started working at THI, I expected to be working more directly with youth, but quickly realized that I would be working for youth in a more indirect way. Although sometimes I had opportunities to travel to different parts of the city to do presentations or table at events, the majority of my time was spent at the NYCLU office, located in the Financial District of NYC. I worked in a cubicle across from my boss and did most of my work on the computer. At times this felt disconnected from the issues and people we were working for, and that was something I definitely struggled with.
However, I don’t think this delegitimizes THI’s work at all, I personally just am more efficient and comfortable in more hands-on and physical work environments. This was probably one of the hardest things about my internship. However, I had a really good relationship with my boss, and from the very first day, when we were talking about summer projects and both of our expectations and goals, I expressed my desire to do interactive and hands-on projects. My boss was really respectful of this, and was really open throughout my entire internship, to me taking on projects such as the Clinton press conference video and tabling at events, that let me explore other ways of doing work around reproductive rights. I think addressing that with her from the beginning really helped set the stage for our summer together, what kind of projects I should take on, and also really established an honest relationship between us right from the start.

In the beginning, I felt like I was just thrown into everything. NYCLU is a big organization and lots of people work there, so in the beginning I wish there had been some kind of training or introduction phase to meet other people and interns. However ultimately, I do learn best by doing, so in a way jumping into work right away was really effective and I learned in the process. My boss was also very independent, so I found that I had to be really pro-active as an intern, in terms of finding things to do, projects to work on, and especially with checking in with her. Although at first I didn’t know how to navigate that, I found that it made me independent and that I started working with my boss more on an equal level.

I had chosen NYCLU as one of my top 5 choices because I liked the focus on education and outreach that is a prominent part of the Teen Health Initiative. I was also really interested in working for and with a younger demographic, because I think it's a
really important stage in life in which to affect people in a positive way. Before this internship, I was really idealistic in my ideas about what it means to do nonprofit work; I was over-eager to get out, meet people, organize, and make positive change immediately. I realize now that in nonprofit work, things take time, and there are a lot of small details that can’t get over looked. So I would say that one of the skills I’ve learned this summer is patience and an understanding that to make long-lasting positive change you’ve got to see how a nonprofit actually runs. This internship has also just really grounded me in my ideas about nonprofit work. I think it is really easy to say “Oh yeah, just go out and organize. That’s easy. Go talk to people, go get people involved.” It’s much harder once you are actually out there, once you have someone who is listening and waiting for you to make your argument. I think those are really valuable skills to have - to be able to talk with people about the work you do and why, and to engage people in something you care about. It sounds simple - connecting with and engaging people - but it is a much harder skill to attain and can only be learned by actually doing it. This internship has contributed to my larger career goals because I definitely want to continue working for social justice, although ideally I would like to do it in a more creative way. I’d like to incorporate the arts more, in ways to bring people together around social justice issues. This internship has given me a lot of insight though, insight that is really valuable to me in whatever way social justice continues to be a part of my choices, life, and future.

I would say that the highlight of interning at NYCLU was interning at NYCLU. Really, New York Civil Liberties Union is a fantastic organization and they do such important work. I feel very lucky and very grateful to have had the experience of being a part of the New York Civil Liberties Union, at least temporarily. Donna Lieberman, the
Executive Director of NYCLU, has her office right on the same floor as everybody else; she walks around frequently, talking with people and is very accessible, which makes it feel more like a community and less like a hierarchical organization. The people who work at NYCLU are always working on different campaigns, but there always seems to be a reason to get together and celebrate *something*, any reason really, to all get together and eat delicious fancy pizza in the conference room and spend time together. My advice to future NYCLU interns is to be pro-active about your internship. There are many opportunities to learn and do things outside of what you are assigned, especially at NYCLU where there is practically no limit as to what social justice work is being done. However, it is your responsibility to take that initiative. Take advantage of all the opportunities available to you and learn as much as you can!