Over the course of ten weeks, I interned at the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights in Oakland, California. The National Network is staffed by a small, dedicated group of veteran immigration reform advocates committed to a long term program of equal rights. They are in it for the long haul. NNIRR is not a bureaucratic mainstream organization with broad-based, top down approaches to immigration reform that often have little wind in their sails, are politically bound to the Democratic Party, and whose main strategy is to find a seat at the bargaining table. These organizations settle for compromise and concession, in an attempt to secure what’s “passable” and “realistic” for Washington. NNIRR is an organization that is deeply embedded in the communities it serves, not willing to compromise on key issues facing immigrants, with the knowledge that true immigration reform is not complete if the end goal is to throw conciliatory minimal reforms at one group of immigrants at the expense of another.

With such momentous work, it was inspiring to see NNIRR’s commitment and goal to encompass all political issues concerning immigration, a reflection of the deep and sophisticated outlook of their policies, its diversity, and quite frankly its truthfulness and commitment to immigrant communities. The work involved included an incredibly important and integral international scope on global migration, climate change, the overwhelming importance of a gender lens on migration and immigration, and the newly forming topic of queer immigration.

At NNIRR, my work consisted of keeping up with legislative updates, bills and markers, documenting human rights abuses on the ground through the Human Rights Immigrant Community Action Network initiative (HURRICANE), using a database known as Martus -
accessed by other immigrants rights groups nationwide, editing and revising parts of NNIRR’s annual report on human rights abuses, and drawing patterns in migration and compiling them into educational factsheets that could be used for future reports. My specific interests lay in the connections between human rights abuses and the state’s intervention in the private lives of that part of the population that could be stripped of all protections, constitutional, universal or natural, as well as the for-profit takeover of federal detention of immigrants.

For a social justice activist, the internship and my assignments added a new depth to my understanding of racism and sexism in this country. I learned a lot about the state’s obsession with the control of bodies and reproductive rights of women of color, in particular, and their intersection with women’s movement. The collaboration of state and federal agencies that had no relation to law enforcement and their intrusion upon familial relations became a big part of my focus on the internship (partly motivated by a sense of outrage and incredulity and partly as a result of the alarming trend of it all). Oftentimes parental rights are delegitimized when social workers and hospital workers report to local law enforcement their suspicions of the undocumented status of the parent, and with the close collaboration between local law enforcement and the Department of Homeland Security, the parents are often detained or deported and the child set up for adoption. At times it seemed as though it was the sole concern of social workers to break up families. This is of course, not news for people working with African American mothers who, when in prison, often have had their children taken away from them and have been vilified for being bad mothers or welfare queens. I’ve noticed this close pattern where enforcement and armed bodies of the state do not reinvent the wheel when thinking up ways to criminalize immigrants, they simply take a chapter from the book on criminalizing African Americans in this country and use it to target, shoot, deport, or lock up
undocumented and documented immigrants indefinitely. I think it is a general lesson for anti-racists to evaluate how racism can be fought and ended. Only when the criminal justice system and the prison system is abolished can all people of color in this country start believing that we have reached a new era.

This, coupled with the Obama administration’s intransigence was a good lesson in analyzing how and where change really comes from. By my sixth week, and during the height of right wing frenzy about health care reform, it became more or less a general consensus among immigration reform groups that nothing was going to go ahead this fall. We were left hoping for some meaningful legislation next spring, but we were also aware that while we focused on Congress, the White House was not going to willingly move on the issue so as not to jeopardize Obama’s chances of reelection. If the Obama Administration had its way, comprehensive immigration reform would have to wait till Obama was reelected. This, along with the media’s coverage of immigration, showed how history or coverage comes about - that is from the bottom up, with the mainstream media often being the last to cover an issue or campaign, instead of the first, the last to decide if it is "fit to print" and that grassroots organizers and communities were always typically behind the momentum, before large national organizations took up a cause, and before the media decides it should invest time covering an issue. This reinforced for me the need to not wait for the media to cover an action before it is addressed, because change doesn’t come from the journalist’s pen, nor is it validated after it’s been set in ink.

I was also frustrated several times by mainstream national advocacy organizations that many students, myself included, have aspired to join or work for post-graduation, that essentially dismissed many cases NNIRR came across because they were not automatically considered easy
or winnable. These same organizations then rode the wave of grassroots organizations on the ground fighting the longer battles, and were given credit – like Amnesty International and its “concern” for human dignity, or the ACLU and its “concern” for the protection of the Constitution, etc. This was particularly disheartening because of all the amazing people I watched everyday come in and work hard on these very issues with much less funding than that given to those other organizations. It felt like a personal betrayal sometimes, and I found myself having a difficult time keeping a healthy separation or balance between work and my personal life. The stories and cases I would cover or document would be emotionally intense and would go home with me at the end of the day. The severity of the reports could also be emotionally isolating, if it hadn’t been for NNIRR’s strategy of what I like to call a “zoom-in, zoom out”. NNIRR’s commitment to community based actions and advocacy, along with a larger, broader, national based agenda, allowed me to feel less isolated and more empowered, and feel not only that I was part of a bigger picture, but that work on the ground was happening to change the realities I was seeing.

The only downside to working at NNIRR was not having fully prepared for the enormity of the issues involved. I would advise anyone considering applying to educate themselves on the immigrants rights movement first. I feel that I wasn’t fully prepared, and spent my first month just educating myself on the issues and the language of the movement, before I could get a hang of more substantial projects. I also feel that a healthy balance and an idea of the emotional severity of some of the work needs to be considered. It has the capacity to take a toll on life outside of the internship, so it is something that needs to be considered and worked on. Another point would be that I was disappointed to not have been able to see the fruits of my labor realized concretely while I was there, even as I knew they would be in the future. But I think that may be
a reflection of the student in me, used to receiving grades and feedback, and does not reflect how some things take longer to progress to fruition, in the world outside college.

With all the challenges, I loved working at NNIRR. I can’t imagine working in a better place in the immigrants’ rights movement, in such a wonderful and sincere working environment, with unwavering and committed advocates, fiercely loyal to immigrants and human rights. I set about at the beginning of the summer wanting to be a part of the movement, and by the end of it, was offered a job at the National Network. It was wonderful to hear from them the appreciation and gratitude (which was definitely reciprocated), and to know that they had valued my presence, above and beyond what I could have imagined.