Bella Week

Sylvia Rivera Law Project

New York, New York

May 2, 2016 – July 8, 2016

One of the things that I loved most about interning at the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP) was getting to be involved in so many different parts of the work. I was an intern with SRLP’s Movement Building Team (MBT). The Movement Building Team is made up of collective members, volunteers/interns, and SRLP staff—it works to build meaningful community involvement and leadership in SRLP’s programmatic and policy work. It’s also the organizing force that creates actions out of the ideas developed by members.

MBT had two events that I was involved in planning. The first was a memorial ceremony to honor Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson at the Christopher Street Pier. The second was a big birthday celebration for Sylvia and Marsha. From the very first conception and planning stages all the way through to both events, I attended the planning meetings, helped with coordination and logistics, and worked to support members in making the events come together. This involved facilitating a planning meeting, designing flyers that followed the creative vision generated by members, creating award certificates, securing clothing donations, organizing flower donations from a few local florists, writing biographies for speeches, and taking photos of the ceremony.

In addition to supporting member-led events, there were many short-term and ongoing projects that I worked on. I collaborated with Kyle (one of the attorneys) and Juana (co-director of MBT) to develop an updated “companion guide for activists” to accompany the second version of Tara Mateik’s documentary, Toilet Training. Working again with Juana and another of
the attorneys, Mik, I made edits and contributions to a comprehensive Prison Visiting Guide that SRLP will be publishing in 2017. There were events, rallies, and meetings that I attended and covered in articles I wrote for the SRLP website. Through these posts I communicated updates from Board of Correction meetings, wrote about New York City discrimination policies and options for recourse, and gathered analyses and thoughts from members to include in posts. I also received the Audre Lorde Project’s Safe Outside the System training and was on their safety and security team during Trans Day of Action.

There were also lots of things that came up with MBT that weren’t necessarily planned projects, but things that members needed support with. Some of these involved speaking on the phone to the drug treatment program, finding shelter contact info, coming along to support members at court hearings, helping with technology questions that people had (to the best of my very limited ability), and a lot of the time, just listening and talking through a rough day that someone was having, or celebrating something exciting that had happened.

Because of the collaborative nature of the Movement Building Team, my internship was dynamic and intersected with many of the other pieces of SRLP’s work. One example of this is the work I got to do to support the Direct Services Team (DST). Some of this involved going to court to get various name-change documents in order for clients who were under tight deadlines; accompanying clients to court (and celebrating with them afterwards); and helping to draft a letter of support for a client’s surgery application. With the Fundraising and Finance Team (FFT) I got to make zines and listen to dance music, and working with the Prisoner Advisory Committee (PAC) I helped brainstorm ideas for a questionnaire to be sent to currently incarcerated members; updated the PAC member mailing list; and assembled content to create the June PAC newsletter.
I was also involved with some of the work of the Prisoner Justice Project (PJP). I went with Juana and Mik to the Trans Housing Unit (THU) at the Manhattan Detention Complex to visit the people detained there. They talked to us about the state of the unit, what they were experiencing, and what kind of support or action SRLP could take on particular issues. I also worked on prisoner correspondence—which involved replying to incarcerated folks who are requesting legal services and resources and connecting them with relevant organizations that might be able to support them with a particular issue, and sending resource guides and legal information. A big part of this was also just having a real and meaningful correspondence with someone. A lot of the time people would be writing in with some heavy issues they were facing, so in writing responses, it was about both being someone who was listening to that and being thoughtful and caring, while also providing real resources that could (hopefully) be helpful to that person.

I appreciated that there were projects that I got to work on, which meant that I was able to work towards goals with great people and see things get accomplished in a really good and thoughtful ways. While these projects and assignments were a big part of the internship, I would say that the most significant role I had was just being a member of the Movement Building Team. The weekly membership meetings every Tuesday night were almost always the highlight of my week. Members made me feel instantly welcome, and over the 10 weeks I got to know so many wonderful people and have so many amazing conversations. Getting to know and work with members, and sit around the table every Tuesday to eat tacos and organize was the best thing about this internship.
The Orlando shooting took place during my internship, and that marked a sad and difficult time. A few people connected to the organization—both staff and members—lost friends in Orlando, so in addition to the grief and anger surrounding the event itself, the anticipated Islamophobic responses, and increased police presence in the Village, there was also tremendous personal grief that was very present in the space.

Some projects and timelines changed after Orlando. There was a historical blog series we were planning for the month of June, but in the wake of the shooting, it no longer felt appropriate or important in the scheme of things, so we abandoned the project. It felt important at this time for me to be available to pick up any extra pieces of work that I could that would allow extra time and space for others’ grief.

One of the big takeaways from my internship has been to simply see the values and organizational structure that I love so much in operation day-to-day. I’m thinking specifically of the meaningful leadership of trans and gender nonconforming low/no-income people and people of color as fundamental to the organization, and also of SRLP’s collective structure. These are simply not part of how things are done in so many other places, so to see a working model of those things has been invaluable. I also appreciate seeing the way that the people at SRLP acknowledge the difficulties that come with having decentralized leadership. People would talk about how the collective structure can make getting things done take longer, and decision-making a little more arduous with more steps to take than would be the case in a top-down structure. But the challenges with collective leadership and decision-making weren’t reason not to do it. Values continued to shape how things were done, at times at the expense of efficiency or
ease. I think for me, just to see those realities owned and acknowledged, and to see work guided by values and rather than what is easiest or most familiar, has been incredibly valuable. I want my future work or projects to also follow in this way—so to have practical knowledge of that framework, rather than just an abstract understanding of it, is going to be useful and inspiring in many aspects of my life.

SRLP is the bomb. Without the funding I got as a RRASC intern, I wouldn’t have been able to do this. I’m beyond happy that I was able to learn from and contribute to what SRLP and its members are doing, and that I got to know some amazing people. I’m already planning my trips back to NYC to visit folks.