Initially, one of the main reasons I applied to work with SPARK Reproductive Justice Now, Project South or Health Initiatives For Youth (HIFY) was my passion and experience working in youth leadership development. When I received RRASC to work with SPARK I was ecstatic because I knew SPARK would be beginning their first youth group just this summer. I soon learned that the youth group they were starting and the work the program would be doing was one of a kind in the movement for comprehensive sex-ed; the Youth and Reproductive Justice program (YRJ), with which I worked, was navigating new territory in order to do fundamental work. Kate and Gabriel are spearheading research that looks at what sex education would really be if it were comprehensive: addressing positive sexuality, safer sex, sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identity, consent, intimate partner violence, nonviolent communication, relationships, harm reduction, fat positivity and a number of other themes that run through the lives of young people. And in line with SPARK’s understanding of social justice, the work is being led by those most affected by oppressive sex education policy: queer and trans youth of color, from the south, where Abstinence Until Marriage Only programming is the norm and pervasive.

Given my passion for working with young people, in entering the program I hoped, and to some extent, expected, that the majority of the work I would be doing would be engaging with the youth group directly. I soon learned that, although I would be attending the youth group every week, and doing prep work to prepare, I would not be facilitating the group or helping to plan the agendas. Instead my main work would be first
and foremost, research, and secondly (although this took up most of my time), inputting, organizing and keeping track of data, meeting minutes, and any other information collected. I was also given the great opportunity to lead some group projects, icebreakers and closings throughout the summer, which I am really grateful for. During my first week at SPARK I learned that the program was, to a large extent, being developed week by week: there were many grey areas, and a lot of uncertainty about how the summer would progress and what the work would look like. This surprised me, as I expected to have clear direction around what I would need to accomplish and was not prepared for, what I perceived as, the vague direction I was given. The program was entering new territory and was thus a work in progress. Because of this, my role would fluctuate throughout the summer and I would need to be very flexible and patient (with myself and the program).

Given all this, it is incredibly admirable how honest and transparent the YRJ co-directors, Kate Shapiro and Gabriel Foster, have been with me. From the beginning, Kate and Gabriel were extremely transparent with me. They were respectful, honest and articulate about the process they were in. Specifically, they articulated well that the program was new, very new, and that they were stretched thin: Kate and Gabriel run an essentially full-time program as part-time staffers. It soon became apparent to me that there is a clear divide between the work of Kate and Gabriel, and the work of Paris Hatcher and Mia Mingus, as co-executive directors and full-time staff, given the differing relationships between their positions (full time vs. part time) and responsibilities.

From the beginning I began building meaningful relationships with Kate and Gabriel, but there was also the rest of the SPARK staff to get to know. On my first day at the SPARK office I attended a staff meeting, so I immediately got a sense, although
superficial, of the relationships between the four staffers at SPARK, and a sense of where the organization is at. One big surprise for me was finding out that SPARK is very significantly divided hierarchically, even though I’d heard that SPARK was organized as a collective. Working with SPARK was my first time working with a politically progressive movement building 501(c)3, and I entered it trying to comprehend the difficulties and highlights of such status. Listening to the discussions that occurred during staff meetings around transparency, hierarchy, funding, and accountability were incredible windows into the 501(c)3 world. Staff meetings were tense and I felt compelled to ask if it was alright for me to be there, given the histories that the people at the table shared, and given my position as a summer intern. SPARK is currently in a major state of transition and I feel very privileged to have worked with them for the summer and gotten such an inside understanding of the difficulties of what it means to be a grassroots non-profit. Nonetheless, it was difficult to see a much needed organization struggling as it is.

My first week at SPARK, I did a lot of different tasks: I volunteered myself as point person for the office makeover and tried to build myself a space I would feel comfortable working in. Although I never fully accomplished my vision for the office, I was able to clean it up quite a bit. During that first week I also inputted data for YRJ and did a number of other office related tasks. Also, during my first week at SPARK, Kate and Gabriel were interviewing youth for the YRJ Facilitation Crew that would begin June 15th. It was fun to make the interviewees feel comfortable, get them water, chat about anything and everything as they waited for their interviews to begin. As a side project, in
that first week I made a wallet size LGBTQ mini-resource guide of Atlanta. In the end we didn’t reproduce it, but it was fun to make, and hopefully it will be useful in the future.

From the beginning of my work with the YRJ program and SPARK in general, I reflected on my position as a white, young, queer person. In the past I had worked with groups of mostly youth of color, but I knew that I did not want to replicate some of the mistakes I’d made, especially the act of taking a position of leadership because of my position as an intern. I realized immediately that I wanted to be very transparent about my obvious, and not so obvious, privileges, especially given that I was working within an organization that is based on the principle of centering the experiences of queer people of color. I also reminded myself I should strive to be nothing more and nothing less than a peer role model and mentor to the other young people in the group, as I hoped they would be to me, and an ally to the YRJ program as a whole, by doing my best work, and by putting in my maximum effort. Being aware of my privileges was something that I struggled with throughout the whole summer, especially during group, but also while doing research.

By the second week at SPARK, the Facilitation Crew had been hired. Five young queer folks of color from Georgia had been chosen, and I would soon learn how brilliant these people really were. Tan, Orlando, Carl, Seema and Cortez were the five people chosen. Tan: a 21-year-old Georgia State student, a socialist, an activist -very active in military counter-recruitment; she was a developing young leader within the progressive community of Atlanta and had just recently come out as queer. I found Tan very inspiring right from the beginning: her openness and honesty about her views on capitalism, false consciousness, and the way she articulated her experiences growing up in rural Georgia
were radical and deep. Tan was an incredibly loving and giving person. There is one quote of hers that articulates well what she was about. She wrote, “love me always, even if the world doesn’t agree with you loving me.”

Orlando: 18 years old, is very active in the queer community, sitting on the youth board at Atlanta’s only LGBTQ youth center. Orlando is also a beautiful drag queen and although I never had a chance to see him perform, I know that he is an incredible performer. Orlando blew us all away at our first community focus group when he did an incredible job facilitating a discussion on issues of sexuality, sexual health, and consensual relationships. It was inspiring to watch Orlando be so open to growing around the language he uses, and he challenged me to think more about what language I find triggering and why.

Carl: a 17-year-old, very eccentric and colorful poet, he blew us all away our first day with a beautifully written poem about where he comes from. Carl was our youngest facilitation crew member and a constant reminder to me that the rest of the group was at a much different life stage. The YRJ program identifies Youth as folks 24 and under. This is different from a lot of other youth groups that identify youth as under 21 or under 18. It was important for me to remember that there are a number of privileges and differing experiences that come with being 18 and older and 21 and older. In fact, I often struggled with the fact that the majority of the group was over 18 and identified as young adult. Cortez, Eli and Seema became my close friends in Atlanta. They are all older than me, which felt strange, but challenged my understanding of interns and youth: that the two aren’t necessarily separate.

Together as a crew, we grew so much this summer. On July 1st, after working with SPARK for a month, I wrote the following:
“I’ve been working with SPARK for a month now; I came on June 1st and yesterday I woke up to a new month, and yet it feels both like a day has passed and a year. For one, the relationships I am building with SPARK staff, SPARK volunteers, and folks within Atlanta’s queer activist communities has made this month seem like a year – I never thought I could meet such amazing people in such a short period of time. But specifically, it’s been the inspiring, principled, extremely intentional, gentle and loving YRJ staff - Kate and Gabriel - along with the whole facilitation crew - Tan, Seema, Carl, Orlando and Cortez: their insights, written words (nothing less than poetry!), jokes, and presence bring me so much joy every Tuesday, I only wish we could meet more often. Side note: I never knew the basement of a church could be the boiling ground for such politically subversive, radically honest, queer-centered, anti-oppression politics.

“And then there is the daily work. The daily work is what has made it seem like a day and night has passed. We are busy, everyday, making it possible for southern queer & trans youth of color-led facilitation and leadership to happen. And why am I so proud to be part of that team – even when it means inputting surveys, cleaning offices, and spending eight hours staring at a computer screen? Because I believe so deeply in what it would mean for a group of five queer youth of color to come together and begin/continue a process: a process of facilitating discussions, holding art-making parties, collecting surveys, taking photos and conducting interviews. This is a process that will result in information and knowledge that, I believe, will benefit ALL queer and trans youth, in fact, ALL youth, no matter what their gender identity or sexual orientation may be. Speaking from the perspective of a white and queer young adult, I know that the ‘zine these five youth make will be a book that will change my life. When information and
knowledge is informed by those experiencing the intersections of so many forms of oppression, how can it not be gold? And by gold I mean something that can drastically and radically rearrange power structures, institutions and relationships between individuals.

“I think too often there tends to be memory loss around the time and energy and people who make significant turning points happen. It’s so important to remember that it took the year long work of two individuals to make it possible for the beginning of this totally beautiful facilitation crew to happen, and it has taken years and decades of struggle by individual queer and trans youth of color to fight for their right to exist. This is a continuation of that. Let’s remember our legacy.”

Just a few hours after writing this, I received a call from Kate. She told me that Tan had died. She went into her room to take a nap and her sister walked in and found her dead. All we ever found out was that she had died in her sleep. Its unclear how Tan died, but no matter the reason, the anger in me is the anger over the loss of a friend, and yet another powerful black queer radical youth. I remember her words so clearly, and the incredible input she had on outreach, her amazing talent as an activist, and her passion as a radical. Tan was a dedicated member of the American Friends Service Committee; Faces of Feminism, a feminist group at Georgia State; and a devoted labor activist with the Progressive Student Alliance at Georgia State. Through the YRJ program at SPARK, she was just entering the world of queer politics and the reproductive justice movement. I know with so much certainty that she would have been one of our next leaders, whether
attending NLNI or speaking at the CLPP conference, her voice, her lived experience and her passion was/is so central. I miss her terribly.

After Tan died, Kate and Gabriel decided on hiring Eli, who they had hoped to bring onto the crew as a 6th person, but decided not to for financial reasons. Eli is a 24-year-old photographer and videographer, and will be leading the graphic aspect of the ‘zine. She became a close friend as well.

In one of the first few weeks with SPARK, I attended the Juneteenth Celebration at Project South. This was the beginning of my developing relationship with the community that makes up Project South. Juneteenth was incredibly inspiring but also difficult. Questions around community surfaced for me. Who was SPARK’s base? What community did SPARK represent? These questions do not have solid answers, because SPARK is a new organization. I have learned that community is something that must be built, defended and fought for, and SPARK is very much at the beginning of that fight. I think the YRJ program really made a major step in building SPARK’s community. By the end of the summer, members of the facilitation crew were representing SPARK in their respective and collective groups of friends and social spaces.

Throughout the summer we did a few major events that acted as entry points into community building. Our first community building/outreach event was tabling at a queer youth carnival and attending a Trans March for Equality. I assisted in the planning for the day, getting all of the facilitation crew out, coordinating some of the tabling, and just generally helping out to make the day run smoothly. We handed out surveys and talked to people about the ‘zine we were making. A number of people loved the survey and
everyone was receptive to the ‘zine. The next major event was the Focus Group. This was also very successful and exciting to plan for. Our final community event was the Art Party. It brought out the most people, which was awesome. We collectively created an incredible queer sex education tree while everyone made their own individual pieces of art for the ‘zine. After all of these events I got the sense that we really were building community amongst queer youth of color and allies. As the summer came to an end, the big question became how would we continue to build that community now that the facilitation crew program was coming to an end?

Planning for the tabling, the focus group and the art party were big tasks that we made happen collectively. I felt good about my role throughout this all: I tried to be a role model throughout it all, while being sure to do much of the tedious planning stuff as well. Given that Kate and Gabriel are only in the office Mon-Wed., I tried hard to stay in touch with the facilitation crew on Thursdays and Fridays – I wanted them to know that the office was a space they could use, if need be, and that the work doesn’t just happen on Tuesday meetings, but throughout the whole week, throughout the whole of our days.

When I wasn’t planning for one of our major community events, I was preparing group building exercises, a photo project and an interview project. I was really excited to be given the chance to do the photo and interview project, as these are two areas of youth work that I find exciting. For the photo project we asked everyone to go out and take pictures to answer various questions we came up with that spoke to reproductive oppression and justice. For the interview project we each interviewed each other about our experiences with relationships, safe sex, and communication.
In my last few weeks at spark I worked fully on the research. In the end, I came out with a 20-page document that covered issues of trans allyship, nonviolent communication, intimate partner violence, consent, supporting survivors and general social conditions in Georgia. I hope this research will be useful for the ‘zine, although looking back I can imagine the research process having gone a lot differently.

Thinking back on this experience, I really wish I had asked more questions. I wish I had probed more into my relationship to the facilitation crew, given that I was around the same age as most of them. I wish I had asked more about SPARK’s community, and more about Kate and Gabriel’s expectations for me. I wish I had asked for what I needed, especially when I needed support around Tan’s death, around doing the research, and around understanding boundaries with the facilitation crew. I don’t think I really had any experience to prepare me for this work. It was wholly new and wholly different from anything I have ever experienced. Because of this, I would have liked to be more confident in myself to ask questions – about the organization, about the relationships involved and about the project. Although I feel extremely disillusioned about the sustainability of small grassroots non-profits, I feel inspired by the immense effort, passion and genius that the four staff at SPARK put into the movement for reproductive justice.