There are gifts in life that are not wrapped in decorative paper and tied with pink ribbons. The gift I received last spring did not come in a box and it was not a puppy. It was the opportunity to intern for ten weeks with Safe Passage, an organization that provides non-judgmental support and shelter to survivors of domestic violence. This internship made me laugh, made me cry and strengthened my desire to fight social injustices. I learned important life lessons from four year olds and that hope can find its way into the darkest corners. The joys and tragedies of this internship have helped to create some of the most meaningful experiences of my life, and I have learned much about myself. This was ultimately the gift of opportunity, which I embraced to the fullest and for which I will be ever grateful.

My first week in the Safe Passage shelter was completely different from what I had anticipated. I had never worked in this setting before and was thrown off guard by the chaos and intensity that seemed to hum in the air. I had assumed I would come right in and begin working with the children, but soon discovered that it was first necessary to establish a relationship based on trust and respect with both the children and mothers.

When I told my supervisor Anthia that I was interested in working with the children who lived at the shelter, she put me in touch with
Vivianna, the Children’s Advocate. I met with her during my first week and shared with her my observation that I was finding it necessary to establish positive relationships with the people whom I would be serving. She validated my observation and suggested that I practice the basics of Floortime Therapy with the children. After some research and guidance from Vivianna I learned that Floortime Therapy is based on child directed play and uses the child’s interest to create a two-way communication. This type of therapy is typically practiced with Autistic children, but is successful with children who have experienced emotional trauma because it is essentially child directed play. I quickly found that the children were much more receptive to me when they directed our time together. I also discovered a tool that I hadn’t used in years: my imagination. While being chased by a dinosaur and attending royal balls as a princess, I gained the trust and respect of the children and in turn their mothers.

Taking the time to build rapport with the residents of the shelter proved to be a priceless investment of my time as the summer progressed. I noticed that children with whom I had established a positive and professional relationship truly respected my authority, which made my work on projects or going on outings to the library or playground much easier.

While I was still figuring out what it was like to work in the shelter, I was also attending the 35-hour volunteer training after work. Although it was an exhausting time for me, I learned about domestic violence from
just about every angle as well as how to interact with shelter residents and answer the hotline.

An ongoing project that I worked on with the children was exploring the topic of peace. Early on in my internship I explored the Northampton Public library for resources and took up the habit of regularly taking out books to read to the children, especially on the subject of peace. At first the children were resistant to reading books and I would regularly receive a chorus of “nnooo” when I announced that it was time to read. Most of the children were not read to with any kind of regularity, and I noticed that the children who could read were not reading at the expected level. It was difficult for me knowing how important reading and literacy skills are to success in school.

A book that was an inspiration for our final project was What does peace feel like? by Vladimir Radunsky. In this children’s book, children from around the world describe what they think the essence of peace is. In my last two weeks working with the children, I interviewed them on what they thought peace was, what it looked like, what it smelled like and how they were going to make more peace in the world. I later helped them illustrate these ideas on poster board and typed their responses to post beneath the images. The children really loved this project! Not only did they enjoy creating the illustrations, but it really brought out their inner poet. When I asked J. age 6 what he thought peace smelled like, he responded “my mom’s perfume.” Their answers tickled my funny bone,
touched my heart and opened up the door so I could catch a glimpse into how they see the world.

When I wasn’t working with the children, I aided the shelter staff in case management and advocacy. This work varied from day to day and included picking an incoming resident up from the bus station, completing intake and exiting paperwork and sorting through donations. At one time in the summer there were no children living at the shelter. This was a challenging period where I had to refocus my work for a while, but it turned into a challenge for the better. I had been interested in learning how to respond to the domestic violence hotline but because of the hotline collaboration between Safe Passage and two other women’s agencies in the area I was never working when the hotline was transferred. I received permission from my supervisor to change my hours and immediately began training. This included familiarizing myself with the hotline resource book and listening in on hotline calls received by staff. I was incredibly nervous about being the first person that people reached out to for help, but after my first call I felt confident in providing support for callers. Answering the hotline proved to be challenging at times, but in the end was one of my most rewarding experiences.

Although my internship was directed at helping others, I learned an incredible amount about myself along the way. Something I quickly learned was how to set limits for myself, mostly regarding the women in the shelter. I was frequently asked for rides to the store or for childcare
when I already had something planned. It was difficult for me at first to find a way to kindly say no, but when I explained that I was not just a volunteer it became easier for me to do this.

Three weeks before the end of my internship a tragedy occurred in the shelter. A woman who had come to us from a severe domestic violence situation suddenly passed away leaving behind three young children. I had never imagined I would have to cope with an event like this and provide support to the women who had lived in the house with her. During this time of shock and grief I felt myself grow. I had never been so close to an event like this and at first struggled with how to provide professional support to the women and find a support system for myself. Connecting with other staff members about this made me feel supported and provided me with a safe place to process. I also realized the importance of constant self care in this area of work, not only in times of tragedy.

Another skill that I developed was active listening. Sometimes when a woman confided in me I would be thinking “what am I going to say?” or “how do I solve her problem?” It took awhile for me to instinctually remember that I did not have to have an answer – that the most important thing that I could do was to really hear what she was saying and to acknowledge her feelings.

Aside from providing direct service, I was also able to see how an agency like Safe Passage works. Attending weekly staff meetings, case
share (when the clinical team meets to update each other on the cases at the shelter) and trainings gave me a first hand perspective of everything that goes into running a non-profit agency. During these meetings I was able to connect with staff I did not see on a day-to-day basis and inform everyone about the work that I was doing. I think my role at these meetings was very important since there are no direct services for the children at the shelter.

I think that my academic background was essential for the work that I did this summer. Coming from a trauma informed perspective I had a basic knowledge of the psychological effects of domestic violence. At one point in the summer I had the opportunity to work with a child who had severe PTSD. At times I was frustrated by the behavior of this child but my understanding of the situation increased my patience and sympathy. I have also taken a class in conflict resolution, which came in handy more than once. My most memorable mediating experience involved two shelter residents. By setting up ground rules before the mediation, emphasizing that only one person speaks at a time and finding a solution that worked for both parties, I helped them to come to an end of their conflict. Oh, and did I mention one of the women only spoke Spanish? My basic knowledge of this language came in useful many times, and I am excited to continue studying Spanish to maximize my impact with social justice work in the future.
As a Peace and Social Justice major I have spent a lot of time learning about interlocking forms of oppression. I did not know a great deal about the intersection of domestic violence with other forms of oppression when I began my internship, but now see its connection to many injustices. I was overwhelmed to discover how intertwined all forms of oppression are, and to eliminate one we must work to eliminate them all. These connections were not apparently obvious until I had a clear understanding of the many contributors that perpetuate domestic violence. Elements of isolation, blaming the victim and viewing a survivor as “the other” take place on the individual and institutional level. It is easier to side with the abuser who asks you to do nothing than to stand with the victim who asks you to speak out.

This realization has strengthened my desire to stand for those who can’t. I hope to continue my work with children, perhaps one of the largest groups that are not allowed a voice. I believe that if we, as a global community, wish to make changes in the way we treat our planet and each other we must begin our work with children. I also know that to achieve this we must all take responsibility for our actions, or inaction. As Mother Teresa once said “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.” Embracing our common humanity and respecting our differences is the essence of creating a culture of tolerance, compassion and responsibility.
Something that I wish I had known before I began my internship was how much freedom I would have in deciding which projects I wished to pursue. I have a passion for working with children and a firm belief that peace, compassion and tolerance can be taught at any age, but I struggled to find a way to make this a reality. My advice for future interns at Safe Passage is to reach out for guidance and support. It frustrated me having a vision but no plan of action.

My work this summer has solidified my hope for a better world and fueled my passion for fighting social injustices. I have now been away from Safe Passage for about two weeks and the time has dragged by in comparison to the three incredible and fast paced months I spent as an intern. In my time away I have reflected on my experiences this summer and how they have aided in my personal growth and rounded out my academic studies with hands-on work. I am still glowing with gratitude that I have been able to do the work I did this summer. I am thankful to Corinna and the rest of the CLPP staff for their support, to the staff at Safe Passage who welcomed me into their community, and ultimately to the women and children at the Safe Passage shelter who included me in their journeys to safety and have forever touched my life.