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Final Report

In one of our weekly staff meetings at the Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies (IWES), Dr. Denese Shervington, the founder of the organization launched the meeting by sharing a paper from the Journal of Health Disparities Research and Practice. Before she read out more from this paper, she explicitly mentioned how imperative it is for an organization to stay grounded and think deeply about the relevance of the issues raised in the reading and their impact on our work with the community. The article explores the implications of historical trauma, health disparities and social epidemiology on public health practice.\(^1\) I value the sense of reflexivity and mission driven work that IWES is committed to. I was impressed by the true commitment to healing, resilience and recovery mirrored in the determination portrayed by this conversation. I could feel the passion and the energy that each staff member carries in their work in bridging health disparities, standing for the underserved populations while rebuilding a resilient community in New Orleans.

My summer was a learning opportunity in a culturally rich city where I was able to experience the intersections of community development, public health and social justice work. One of my main goals for this internship was to gain a deeper understanding on how a community based organization engages the community while prioritizing the health of women and girls. I was thrilled after my first outreach encounter in the community through an ImPACT (Informed Parents and Children Together) session during my first week. I participated in ImPACT through one of the HIV prevention programs for youth. We visited youth in the

program and engaged in conversations with their parents/guardians about HIV, STIs, safe sex, teen pregnancy and talked about starting the conversations with their children early. This was such an enlightening moment for me especially because I was able to see how the messages were being transmitted into the community and finding out the questions and concerns that parents have on these issues. As an active observer, I gained a lot from the conversations and from my co-workers as they facilitated the discussion and provided information and resources for youth and families.

After meeting and talking with the executive director of IWES, I honed my focus and developed a work plan for the summer. I spent the bulk of my time working on the Sexual and Reproductive Health Advocacy Project (SRHAP). SRHAP addresses the health disparities Post-Katrina and to promote sexual and reproductive health education for women and girls in New Orleans. There was a need to address health disparities after Katrina. When Dr. Shervington shared the article on historical trauma and how natural disasters heighten the susceptibility of communities to fighting disease, I was moved to learn more about the effects and relevance of the storm to the work of the IWES. I read Stories of Survival (and beyond): Collective Healing after Katrina, a collection of personal accounts published by IWES after Katrina. Reading such heart wrenching stories was critical in my processing and understanding the community that I was working in.

Through SRHAP, I worked on communication interventions in building constituency for sex education policy in Louisiana schools. Louisiana is one of the states where sex education is not mandated by the state law hence it is up to the school to teach or not to teach sex education. However, with the alarming rates of unintended teen pregnancy and HIV among youth in New Orleans and on the state level, there is a strong need for youth to get health education in their earlier years. I did comparative research for Louisiana and other states and I was startled by the
rates of unintended teen pregnancy, school dropout and HIV/STI infection for New Orleans in particular. I collaborated with the IWES team in thinking about designing a sex ed policy template that schools can adopt. I developed a Sex Education Position Statement which will be coupled with the policy template for school principals. This is a way of communicating with the school policymakers and to emphasize the urgent need for “comprehensive” sex education in schools. In this project, I had to think about the audience for the communication interventions as well as the message to be transmitted. The writing and research process was enlightening and my supervisor’s guidance was priceless. As a writer, I developed an awareness about tailoring my writing for a specific audience, being sensitive to the different belief systems/perspectives as well as interpreting statistics into statements that support an argument. I also had to consider the perspectives of other health professionals and educators especially those who work in schools. In order to incorporate their opinions, I had meetings with local health educators who work at School Based Health Centers at different schools and learned about the needs, barriers and concerns about teaching sex education in the schools. One of the physicians I met with spoke with deep sincerity and concern for the youths and how they simply do not understand how their bodies are changing. There is an urgent need for comprehensive sex education curriculum that incorporates medically accurate and age appropriate information for the youth to make healthy and responsible decisions.

Another highlight from my 10 weeks was the Essence Music Festival (EMF) and the SuperLife Transformation initiative. I was not spared from the culture of festivities in the Crescent City and this year EMF had a special feel to it. IWES collaborated with Essence Magazine and Chaka Khan Foundation to work with 50 women form the greater New Orleans area and support them to achieve three of their main, self-identified goals. It was wonderful to participate in the festival, enjoy the activities while doing meaningful work with women in the community. The Empowerment Sessions at EMF were a symbol of the investment in the
rebuilding of the city through its women. Working on this program—The Superlife Transformation was a wonderful opportunity to understand the challenges, obstacles as well as potential for growth within the community. I thought that the cohort of the women chosen for the program reflected the reality of New Orleans. The Super Life reception was inspirational—it was a powerful moment to be in a room full of potential, energy enthusiasm and above all, hope. New Orleans has the potential and the women in this community are an integral part of the change that the city needs to see. I was truly inspired and honored to be part of the team that is working tirelessly towards transformation.

I also learned from the youth who participated in programs at IWES. I was able to understand the issues of youth development and effective programming through the various sessions. The different curricula covered various topics such as negotiation skills, condom demonstrations, STI and HIV transmission, safer sex, and consent. The activities and programs that I participated in shaped the communication interventions project that I spent most of my time working on. Through observing the youth programs, working on the SuperLife initiative as well as attending meetings with health educators in the community, I was able to gain a profound understanding about the need for sex education in Louisiana schools especially in the context of fighting and preventing HIV and other STIs.

My experience at IWES also expanded my awareness of the reproductive movement in the US and across the globe. I read a lot about the reproductive movement in the developing world and spent some time going through the reproductive framework at the core of organizations such as UNFPA. It dawned on me that I had not thought much about the reproductive rights movement on a global scale even though I strongly believe that HIV/AIDS is a large component of the movement in terms of access and women’s health. More importantly, the Reproductive Health Bill of Rights for Women of Color drafted by IWES stems from the International
Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, 1994. It is at the same conference that UNFPA developed their reproductive rights framework with a focus on population and development. After working closely with IWES and being part of the reproductive rights movement, I have begun to realize the strong interconnectedness of the issues on women’s health, reproductive rights and cultural sensitivity to such issues in different communities across the globe.

My experience cannot be summed up by the policy and communication documents that I worked on—I had an incredible time with the IWES team, learned from them as professionals and facilitators through numerous encounters. I developed more interest in policy work after working on advocacy issues around sex education policy and I will consider policy work in my career plans. I enjoyed being an observer in some of the youth programs such as Teen outreach program, Making Proud Choices and Focus On Youth. However, being trained as a facilitator for one of the programs would have enhanced my capacity to have more active participation in the sessions and I hope that can be considered for future interns.

I treasure the deep human connections that I made through the activities and programs at IWES and being able to connect with the community on different levels. I am very grateful of this experience—for having an opportunity to explore the issues of reproductive rights, policy work and community health. It was great to be a part of the larger movement that seeks to recognize the human right to reproductive rights and addressing issues of social justice, trauma and historical oppression. I am thankful to RRASC/CLPP for this opportunity and for my host organization, IWES for the support!