

Project South: A Summer of Deconstruction, Liberation, and Revolution

My name is Elijah Dixon, and this summer I had the wonderful opportunity of interning with Project South: Institute for the Elimination of Poverty and Genocide. Project South, based in the vibrant city of Atlanta, is an organization with the primary mission of raising effective leaders to assist in cultivating a society of inclusiveness, equality, and justice. My summer experience with Project South gave me a new sense of liberalized ideology that I could not find in the books and classrooms of academia. This summer experience with Project South also gave me the truest form of love, community, and progressiveness into a new sociopolitical and economical era of equality and justice. This was a feeling I've never felt before, and I reflect on my experience with Project South with love and a newfound inspiration for equality.

The South has always been the turning-point and reference for political, economic, and social reformation and progression in the United States. As the great W.E.B. Dubois wrote during the Jim Crow era, "As the South goes, so goes the nation," a quote that has become the theme and motto of Project South. As a Southerner, born and raised in the Deep South, the culture throughout the South represents a different perspective to the dominant narrative of progression in the U.S. The South not only represents a different perspective, it represents where our activism currently lies and the progression we truly made. The South is the battleground for all political, social, and economic reformation and justice. The work that Project South does not only impacts the regions of the Deep South, but Project South works in liberation for the entire nation and global world.

In knowing the rich history of the South, I walked into the office of Project South excited for the revolutionary work to be done, and as expected, the first day of work in Project South was jam-packed with conferences to plan and discuss. I rolled-up the sleeves of my dress shirt, gave

myself brief introduction, and the staff and I began the first project of my summer internship. We had two conferences to finalize plans for in the coming week.

Our first conference in the following week was for the “Universidad Sin Fronteras” known in the English language as the “University Without Borders.” The Universidad Sin Fronteras (UNSIF) is an organization that exists to create space to develop peoples’ critical consciousness through education. UNSIF was created by Project South in the 1980s and has existed since, providing accessible education to contribute to the progressiveness of the South. UNSIF believes that knowledge is not a privilege but a right for all people, and within the following hour, my colleagues and I had finalized the initiatives and goals set for the UNSIF conference. Already, so early into my internship experience, I felt as though I was learning the fundamentals of activism – an accessible progressive holistic education. When we educate our movement, not only do we know critically what we are fighting against, but we can all contribute as a community to creating comprehensive solutions that combat the inequality and injustice we experience. Education is the first step to shifting the moral consciousness of individuals.

After finalizing plans for the UNSIF conference, we all took a small break before rejoining to discuss the second conference of the following week, the “Southern Movement Assembly.” The SMA conference was centered around movement building and initiation. Progressive organizations from all regions within the South come together to create an effective comprehensive plan to fight for justice and equality. As I was listening to my peers discuss the conference, I began to jot notes down, quickly filling the pages of my notebook. “Educate the people with holistic liberalize theory, then unite the people to act upon these theories,” I wrote into my notes. Only within my first day at Project South, I was learning, growing, and developing into the activist that I’ve only dreamed of becoming.

Shortly, our meeting ended, and I became acquainted with the organization I would call home for the summer. I strolled throughout the building observing the old bricks walls that wanted to tell me it's history, the painting that spoke volumes about culture and activism, and the photos that lined the hallway with community activists who fought for the people's freedom in this same sacred space. The building was connected to the people, and the past, the present, and the potential fight for a better future existed simultaneously within this space. I felt at home, and I already felt connected to the people of Southern Atlanta. I left my first day of work humble and grateful to have this experience and eager to work with Project South in the fight for equality and justice.

In the following week, Project South hosted the two conventions, and I can attest that I left a more developed leader after the conventions. Even though my role during these conferences was primarily logistical, I was given the opportunity to participate and learn with the community. Through that participation, I learned critical skills about social justice, movement building, and radical love I didn't learn in college.

My most memorable moment throughout both conferences was centered on movement building. It was the last day of the Southern Movement Assembly, and the organizers would sing the great hymns of the past, hymns that gave activist the strength to endure through most difficult times. After we had sung as many hymns as we could, we drew a timeline of the entire year on the wall and began to set events and plans for a united revolutionary fight for justice and equality. This moment was memorable to me because throughout my collegiate education surrounding social justice, I've only been taught critically the problems that existed in society. I knew how to define and critically analyze racism, homophobia, classism, sexism, and many other oppressive forces. However, I didn't know how to act upon my liberal education. I didn't

know how to relate to the movement beyond theory. Both conferences had equipped me with knowledge and skills of movement building and creating revolutionary love and power within the people.

As the summer progressed, I had the opportunity to hone these skills of movement building in radical, holistic, and cultural manners: joining various protests throughout Atlanta, attending community meetings on social issues, and participating in many events that centered on a spectrum of liberation, such as queer liberation and class liberation. There were so many opportunities within Atlanta to craft and perfect my activism.

Within Project South, I was tasked with a project that gave me a lesson I didn't expect to learn from this internship experience. One of my projects for the summer was to digitalize the history of Project South into a comprehensible timeline. Along with this timeline, I was to add important events throughout World history. This was a daunting task, reading through the history of Project South, digitizing photos, programs, and other events held that coincided with the history of Atlanta. It did seem overwhelming, and it wasn't until the 7th week of my internship did I realize how important this project was, not only for me but the activists to come. This realization came from an important quote by my favorite writer James Baldwin: "Know from whence you came. If you know whence you came, there are absolutely no limitations to where you can go." This realization seemed to complete my summer experience. We are a people of history and understanding this radical history can help us visualize where we want to move with our civil rights. I was able to complete four timelines throughout my internship experience, and each timeline focused on the Economic, Political, and Social timeline of the world and of the South.

By and large, this summer internship experience was an experience that centered radical love and equality. This experience only brought forth liberation theories and taught me how to better apply those theories to the people and to build a movement off the application of love, equality, justice, and humanity. It taught me more about the intersections of reproductive rights and social justice, and I began understanding critically that one cannot exist without the other. As a potential Psychologist and Public Policy Analyst, I needed these realizations and skills to better understand the people, their struggles, and how to effectively diminish those struggles of injustice and inequality. I am very thankful for the enriching opportunities Project South and Civil Liberties and Public Policy provided me with.

To my potential future interns, my advice to you as you follow into your organization is to constantly focus on radical love and center radical love into all you do. Radical love builds a connection from the liberal theories to the people, and with love, you will be able to share more of these theories with the people and unite to fight for the justice and equality they deserve. When I interned with Project South, I critiqued things from a scholarly and academic perspective, and even though it assisted my understanding, it didn't fully grant me access to understanding the people we fight with and fight for. I wish you the best of luck as you journey to your sites.