Different Avenues was the internship of a lifetime. I can’t control myself from constantly making references to the organization. My experience at Different Avenues was a journey like no other I have experienced. The organization contributed to my growth as a student, organizer, leader, and just overall person. I often compare my experiences at Different Avenues to the experience of a privileged white girl in Africa. I say that because I found myself often wanting to save everyone and change everything. I came into Different Avenues believing that I knew exactly what it meant to be an under-privileged black girl, but after about three weeks into my internship I knew I was pleasantly mistaken. Unlike that white girl, the experiences of the girls at Different Avenues weren’t foreign to me. Before these girls, I had always looked at the issues the girls faced with an outsider lens, only getting personal once in awhile. At Different Avenues, the issues became a part of me, I now look through these girls’ eyes.

My first week at Different Avenues was my induction to the chaos. It wasn’t yet the full on chaos, but it was enough to make me feel at home. I instantly felt a familial vibe that came from my first meeting with Kelli Dorsey, Executive Director at the Different Avenues. There wasn’t much work for me the first week, unless I made it for myself. The one thing I could be sure of was that almost every day there was a meeting. I knew that any comment made during work hours was subject to a beautiful political education moment. My first week was a settling in week. I talked about my ideas for the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP). There was a final decision that I would help the SYEP make a play about true experiences of girls in the juvenile justice system. This would be my major project for the summer. The main projects for SYEP were going to be the play, a “Know Your Rights” ‘zine, and a “Reproductive Justice” ‘zine. We were supposed to take separate days to facilitate workshops and trainings that would
help to produce the three projects. This was the plan, but things changed. There wasn’t much
time to plan the logistics for SYEP, because of the office’s week of traveling to NLNI and the
Allied Media Conference. The SYEP started with short notice, with some ideas, but no clear
direction. There was lots of confusion about leadership, and without Kelli’s presence, the youth
were sometimes hard to handle. There were times that criminalization systems interrupted our
programming. Although we had a schedule, we had girls coming and leaving at all different
times because of the system or issues of real life. When all the girls were around there were
beautiful teaching and growing moments.

The day I got to do theatre work with the girls was one of my most favorite days. I was
able to bring my knowledge of theatre to the girls through games and old school lecturing. The
girls were excited. I felt accomplished seeing the girls learn the art I love. I think the girls like
talking about things outside of the social justice realm. I taught the theatre game big booty and it
is still a favorite icebreaker to this day. I also organized the opportunity for SYEP to go to see a
play. We opened the play opportunity to the girls in the group homes we work with as well. The
play viewing went well. There were a few distractions, like a girl’s house arrest box kept going
off during the play. The girls’ behavior was that of most teenagers. They were great.

Every Tuesday two youth and I led group at a DC group home. The group home
workshop planning was sometimes stressful, but most of the time fun. There were times we had
to change ideas for group, because there was not enough information on topics to teach them.
The girls would sometimes rely heavily on me for group ideas, which put a lot of pressure on me.
I felt uncomfortable when the final decision for group was in my hands, because I didn’t know if
Kelli would accept my idea or not. I feel like I could have avoided this pressure by doing some
homework. Kelli made it clear that I was an experienced facilitator, so I understand why the girls
relied on me. Actual groups at the group home usually went well. We got the girls to do journals to help us with writing the play. They were very smart and often understood everything we came to discuss with them. There was only one time that I felt disoriented at group. These were my last two groups. The girls at this group were tough. They wanted us to break, because they believe our organization was a part of the system. I didn’t get a chance to figure out how to handle this group. I want to learn more skills to deal with groups that are rowdy and testy.

A few weeks into SYEP, I realized there were some major structural issues with Different Avenues. There was no way to have all the youth workers together at once. Everyone was unclear about the assignments. I knew I was putting together a play, but there was no time left. The girls were inconsistent and the play would be more mine than theirs. We tried several ways to work with the conditions we had, but enough was enough. Mandisa, Emily, Grace, and I came up with a work schedule that we thought would help get more work done, and clear up people’s work confusion. We came to a consensus that working in the separate groups everyday would be best to complete all our tasks. We decided that we should work in these groups Monday-Thursday and have larger group meetings on Fridays. These Fridays would be used for journaling and for people to add input to other projects. On Fridays each group would get a chance to facilitate a workshop or report back on their projects. This would give the girls more experience on presenting and develop some leadership skills. These ideas worked for the most part, but we never got to the group presentation part, because of office upsets. My project ended up changing into an audio piece. I had the girls write stories about the system and we recorded them. Then and still now, I am making the recording funky. I am layering music on the recording, smoothing transitions, and all that jazz. We plan to have the recording aired on a local DC radio station.
There were internal issues that arose at the office. There was sometime really harsh name-calling, and intense back and forth arguing. I kept my cool with the girls for the most part, but there was a time I lost my temper. The girls were stressed and being extremely disrespectful and I spoke out about it. One of the girls got angry and accused me of talking to her like a child. It was a messy scene. I definitely was treating her like an adult, I was calling her out for not working and her lack of participation. I admit I could have been kinder in my critiques, but I was stressed. Everyone gets to a breaking point sometimes, and I apologized. I talked to Kelli and Mandisa about it, and they were refreshingly supportive about the situation. They came to my defense more than I, myself, did.

The juvenile justice system controlled everything about the Different Avenues office. It was the sole reason for all the chaos. There was always something new each day that hindered the work at Different Avenues. Whether it was a girl getting stepped back (this was punishment for small or even unsubstantiated infractions of the rules of the system), a girl running away from her horrible group home, Kelli on the phone with case managers, having to address problematic comments and conversation with political education, or more everyday chaos. The chaos is what made me love Different Avenues. My internship was like no other. I was experiencing the reality of small organizations with limited staff. I saw the over-worked eyes of Kelli every morning, but more than her tiredness, I saw her passion. She could have easily left this chaos and let Different Avenues be a program that once was. She could have made Different Avenues a place that only did national work, but she didn’t. She started to develop a new future for Different Avenues. The organization was in need of a new outlook, and Kelli made sure that everyone who was anyone at Different Avenues had a voice in this process. Over two weeks, Kelli, Different Avenues workers, and the board developed a new organizational structure for Different Avenues. I was
very exited about this process and very happy to be a part of it. Kelli also understood that
Different Avenues needed to ask important questions about the non-profit structure and the
system – specifically, does it work for an organization like Different Avenues. They needed to
find away to be self-sufficient. We came up with a new structure and the new structure gave
people clear job titles, and gave newer youth a clear path to move up and grow in the
organization. My favorite part of the structure is the leadership ladder; I feel it really captured the
necessary transitional track the girls need to go through to work with Different Avenues.

Kelli often says to me, “You are the last RRASC we can have for a while.” I didn’t
understand that until about three weeks before my internship was about to end.* There was an
incident involving “playful” violence. Two of the girls were being overly touchy on the way to
the train from work. I was pushed multiple times, and my hair was pulled. None of this hurt me,
but it made me uncomfortable. Especially the time I was pushed while walking down the stairs.
Before this incident there was a fake choking incident that involved a chord around my neck. I
was able to stop this with my firm voice and by removing the chord from my neck with a little
force. The girl claimed she was playing, but I didn’t like the game.* After the second incident, I
decided to talk to Kelli about what happened. We had very insightful discussion about the issues.
I told Kelli how I felt. I told her that I understood where the violence was coming from. It was
coming from jealousy. There was a lot the girls had to envy about me. I say this not to sound
conceited, but I say this to recognize my own privilege. We talked about the complexities of
experiences of people who sometimes may be from the same area, race, and class group. For
example a poor black girl in college experiences the world much differently than a poor black
girl working as a hustler. This conversation was only relevant to me because of my life
experience. Also my ability to handle violence once again comes from life experience. My life
was a lot different than most people I grew up around, but I still saw life through their lenses, because their lives surrounded me. I think if a new RRASC comes, they will need to have life experience.

This internship made me realize that there is much more to life experience than race and class. This is something that I had been realizing at Hampshire, but I didn’t see clearly until my internship. I am knowledgeable about the juvenile justice system in DC. I want to destroy criminalization. My life experience has made me a pretty great analyzer. Different Avenues gave me a lot and I gave them a lot of me, as well.

My experiences at Different Avenues were enriching and life changing. I now want to start my own community-based organization. I don’t yet know what I want my organization to focus on, but I do know I want to be grassroots. I want to stay out of the non-profit structure, and I want to stay out of systems. I learned that I have passion for social justice, great analyzing skills, and am a natural organizer. I am truly grateful for this internship. I am really going to miss working at this organization. It is my family, and I will always be attached to it. I heart Different Avenues.

The Allied Media Conference was a lot fun. It really made the idea of incorporating media and arts into social justice work even more appealing. I went to a workshop that changed my whole viewpoint on the sex work industry. I knew Different Avenues did national work around the sex trade industry, so I choose a workshop at the conference with this in mind. I had only been at Different Avenues for two weeks, so I really hadn’t had a chance to really develop any full opinions on sex work. A short workshop called, “Every Ho I Know Says So,” helped me to figure out my feelings on the subject. It was funny how this workshop on sex workers and
their relationships with partners was my time to formulate a more finalized opinion about sex work. I am less judgmental about the profession, and I now have a greater understanding of the complexities of youth sex workers. This workshop made it easy for me to understand Different Avenues’ work.