The 11 weeks I spent with the Poderosas of the NLIRH’s Red de Abogaciánde Latinas [RAL] de Texas were packed with education, activism, and community organizing all centered around being a Latinx womxn living in the United States, most specifically living on the U.S.-Mexico border.

Essentially, multiple times a week the Poderosas travel throughout the four major counties of the Rio Grande Valley – Starr, Hidalgo, Cameron, and Willacy – and go into colonias and primarily low-income communities of color to help educate and empower folks within those communities to help them enact change in their lives. They also have an intersectional activist presence at rallies, marches, and other demonstrations and work with allied organizations to put on programming and support other organizations in doing work in the RGV. The main work I did was in attending the community meetings that the Poderosas held, with there being usually 4-5 meetings per week all across the Valley. Each month had a different teaching topic; June was focused on supporting LGBTQ+ members of our communities, and we also talked about the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals/Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Whole Woman’s Health Supreme Court decisions, and July and August were focused on civic engagement, where we discussed the importance of registering to vote (if possible), ways to get involved even if one is unable to vote, and we provided resources for the womxn to understand the power and responsibilities of local, state, and national legislative bodies.
Many times we’d go to the homes of fellow Poderosas in colonias, or go to a community resource center and there we would hold our meetings, and we’d sometimes have other organizations tabling at these meetings and providing resources and services for the womxn at the meetings. Our meetings almost always ended with lotería and raffles of gifts and housewares, which both served as a form of community building and provided an incentive for the womxn to return to the following month’s meeting and invite more friends. We would also participate in monthly protests with allied organizations such as Fuerza Del Valle that demanded immigrant justice, LGBTQ+ justice, and economic justice, and we often tabled at health festivals and other events that asked for the Poderosas to be present.

In terms of projects I worked on, I made several videos during my time working with the Poderosas: one on the *Whole Woman’s Health v. Hellerstedt* decision in June, and one recapping our Week of Action in August. The WWH video is going to be used as a resource for a conference one of my supervisors is presenting at, and the Week of Action video was posted on our Facebook page! Other projects I worked on were databases for our Adoptando Una Cuadra project, which was a pilot initiative for civic engagement where Poderosas would go to a particular block in their community and canvass to get the information of folks who were not yet registered to vote or who needed rides to the polls come election day, as well as a database of all our allied organizations and associates along with their contact information to make it easier to send out mass e-mails and texts inviting them to events. I was also involved in helping plan several large events, such as the Week of Action and our upcoming All Access event in September.

For the Week of Action, I was responsible for organizing the meetings and sending out meeting memos to all our allies, scouting out potential venues for the event and getting cost
estimates for each, creating the application for organizations to table at our event and sending them out, and coordinating transportation to and from the All Access event via rental vans. For the Week of Action, I helped by calling allies and organizations the week before our Week of Action and asking them to participate by bringing donations of school supplies for the families that would be in attendance.

Lastly, while not a project, I was given the opportunity to travel with my supervisors to go and visit two satellite groups of Poderosas in Corpus Christi and in Houston. In Corpus Christi, we held a Mini-LOLA (Latinxs Organizing for Leadership and Advocacy) training where we saw the leadership and organizing skills that we apply toward reproductive justice being applied to issues that more directly affect their community, such as attaining clean water for colonias. In Houston, we worked on education and empowerment with an incredible group of womxn. These trips showed me that while our situations and what we organize around may not be the same in each community throughout Texas, it’s possible to share the skills and the drive for community organizing and apply that to whatever our communities need.

I used a number of skills throughout my 11 weeks with the Poderosas, but the skill I used the most was my knowledge of Spanish. I was speaking almost entirely in Spanish throughout my internship given that it was the primary language of my supervisors and the womxn we were working with. I was doing writing in Spanish, as well as translating at events when necessary. I also got to use my writing skills by authoring several monthly blog posts for the organization and interviewing Poderosas for blogs and videos, as well as video-editing skills such as shooting, editing, and producing when creating videos for the RAL.

The main difficulty that I experienced was getting used to not having a concrete schedule. I had to completely throw out the notion that I’d be having a job in an office and that I’d be
working from 9 to 5 every day. There were some days where I’d work for an hour in the
mornings and the rest would be work at home, and there were others where my work was
attending two different rallies in one day. It was never quite the same work every day, and while
it definitely kept it interesting, there were times I wished I had a little more structure.

In order to help me with some structure, I’d set up deadlines with my supervisors and I’d
work with those in mind so that I wouldn’t lose track of projects or leave them for the last
minute. Another one of the things about working at the community level that the Poderosas do is
that events and community meetings will change without warning, and a lot of times we’re
working on a day-to-day basis. While every month a calendar of meetings is established and each
location has a designated date for their meetings, such as the second Tuesday of the month or the
third Friday of the month, there were often times where meetings would get switched or canceled
and I’d be left with little to no notice. Thankfully for the meetings in which I’d have to drive an
hour or so I always was given sufficient warning and only had cancellations when the meetings
were 15-20 minutes from home, which really wasn’t that big of an issue.

The highlights of my internship weren’t necessarily defined by concrete accomplishments
or tangible finished products. I’d say that the highlights of my experience were more centered
around the community that I found myself in when working with the Poderosas and the way that
I felt completely and entirely at home when working. Part of these highlights was getting to go
into colonias and rural communities to help the muxeres within these areas educate and empower
themselves and watching them go out and start conversations with neighbors and friends and
bring more people to the following month’s meeting was always such a great thing to see. Also,
the way that a community was built around the Poderosas and how organizing has brought so
many of these muxeres together and has made lasting friendships and relationships for so many
of them. I was treated like a daughter by so many of the muxeres in the group and continue to feel like these womxn are family to me because of how tight-knit and close the community of Poderosas were and how dedicated they were to showing up at every event that we held or that we were helping support.

My academic studies definitely helped me prepare for the roles and tasks that I took on during my internship, as well as helped me view the work I did within the larger lens of historical understanding. Journalism gave me the writing skills necessary for the blogs that I would be writing and the interviews I’d be conducting, as well as an understanding of video that helped me when I was shooting, editing, and producing. Latin@ Studies helped me have a fundamental and more historically-grounded sense of the disadvantages that Latinx folks face when attempting to access community resources and the continued injustices and discrimination at the hands of society and the state against Latinx folks, black folks, and other people of color.

While the internship experience hasn’t fundamentally changed my life goals or career goals, it definitely has made me rethink what exactly I want to do with writing and what kind of topics I want to cover and audiences I want to reach as a journalist. The experience has also made me look more towards my Latin@ Studies major as a reminder that whatever I want to do, I want it to be centering the voices of Latinx folks and their experiences, whether through activist writing and reporting on issues that concern the Latinx community as well as telling the stories of Latinx folks across the United States, as well as potentially working for communications for an organization or publication that is focused on social issues and/or Latinx issues. I definitely want my activism, and specifically my passion for reproductive justice and my pride in my Latinx background and community, to be incorporated into whatever work that I do in the future,
and I feel like this internship experience has opened my eyes to the different ways in which this can be achieved.

In my experience, I definitely feel as though I learned more about the intersections of reproductive rights and social justice issues. While I knew and understood these intersections in theory, I feel like working directly within communities that were being affected by numerous social justice issues, and who because of these issues had limited or restricted access to reproductive health resources, I was able to see a direct and tangible connection between all these issues. I would see womxn who couldn’t access reproductive health because they were undocumented, or who needed access to healthcare services because of the environment surrounding where they lived, or that they couldn’t afford medical care because the husband of the home was having his wages withheld by a crooked boss. Witnessing the lived experiences and the ways that these oppressions and struggles intersect allowed me to see why the intersectional work the Poderosas do is so important, as well as why it’s essential to go into the work understanding the ways that oppressions and struggles intersect, and how those intersections impact reproductive rights.

In terms of the internship and the organization, I loved my experiences with both NLIRH as an organization and my time spent with the Poderosas at the RAL de Texas. It was fascinating to see how even while operating under the larger National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, there was never any sort of one-size-fits-all approach to any of the organizing that the RAL did. There was a clear understanding from the top down that what works in New York may not work the same way in the Rio Grande Valley, just as what works down here may not work in Florida or Virginia. There was always consideration and an understanding of what each community needs, and it was incredibly refreshing to see and work within an organization with
this kind of commitment to individualized and unique community organizing and reproductive justice.

In terms of sending an intern again, I would recommend NLIRH as an organization over and over because I had such a great experience working with them. However, I would discourage sending just anyone to the RAL de Texas simply because of how isolated it is from any sort of larger city life and because of the structure and nature of the work. I had a great experience because this is where my family and friends live and this is my hometown, but can’t promise the same for someone who transplants themselves here for the summer to do this work. It may also get frustrating not having a concrete 9-5 schedule, especially with the conditions of it not being in a larger city with a more social life. Spanish is also a MUST for communicating with the womxn here. However, if those factors are not important and they are deeply interested in doing grassroots reproductive justice work largely focused on undocumented, low-income Latinx womxn and Texan womxn at large, then I fully recommend working with the RAL de Texas.
Photo from the Whole Woman’s Health v. Hellerstedt decision day outside our local WWH clinic!

Me on my last day with the Poderosas!
The Poderosas at one of the immigrant justice rallies we attended!

This was when we were discussing supporting LGBTQ+ community members with folks!
What our community meetings looked like – several womxn meeting up at a house for some casual educational conversation and loteria.