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Tewa Women United (TWU), Espanola, NM
Summer 2016

**Final Report**

Having the immeasurable privilege to work as a RRASC Intern this past summer at Tewa Women United was truly a transformative, challenging, and enlightening experience for me. Having had some time to decompress and process my work and the experiences that made it up, I can say that this summer absolutely changed my life and in a multitude of ways. Being that I was in New Mexico for a little over twelve weeks, it is no doubt that I was impacted personally and professionally during my time there.

**THE ORGANIZATION**

TWU is a monumental organization that offers interns the experience of working in an environment that embodies decoloniality through its intersectionality of programs, community-based staff and interns, and grassroots organizing and advocacy. TWU offers interns an opportunity to work in truly unique rural environments with vast cultural diversity. Also, I was the only intern that was not specifically from the areas served by TWU, which was amazing because the organizations really upholds a grassroots community-driven mentality by striving to support their own community members that want to work at the organization.

Stating that TWU is phenomenal feels like an understatement. I am forever grateful to have been surrounded by so many inspirational and motivated women and mostly indigenous women and other women of color! Nothing about the organization ceased to amaze me. From the conference room that contained an altar with various spiritual symbols and objects, ten framed drawings of the corn model created by the local
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elders, and a giant moon cycle calendar for 2016 (which the organization planned some of its events around) to the general organizational model of TWU that is circular and relies on honesty, transparency, and respect of the organization’s circle of grandmothers to the overall energy I felt in my workspaces at TWU, it all provided me and my coworkers with so many opportunities for healing, love, and support. TWU presented a completely non-western model and approach to maintaining an organization. This was a dream for me and really opened my eyes to the possibilities of what nonprofit organizations can and should look like. Of course, like any non-profit there were obstacles, barriers, and struggles that come from within the organization and outside influences, but I believe in the beauty of complexities and TWU recognized those complexities while also managing to do amazing work for communities in New Mexico and the U.S. as a whole.

Tewa Women United works through a framework of what they name Opide which is a Tewa word that translates to, “the braiding of”. Our Executive director, Dr. Corrine Sanchez studied this framework throughout her dissertation. TWU’s application of “Opide” for the organization meant the braiding and interweaving of each of the programs within the organization. TWU has five main programs with some subprograms: the V.O.I.C.E.S. program which addresses sexual violence and other related trauma, Indigenous Women’s Health and Reproductive Justice Program (where I primarily worked), The Women’s Leadership & Economic Freedom Program which contains the A’Gin Healthy Sexuality and Body Sovereignty program for young native girls, the
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Environmental Justice Program, and the Circle of Grandmothers. The goal of Opide is to prioritize intersectionality and the fusion of all of TWU’s programs. I loved this!

As an intern, I had the privilege of being able to embody Opide through my involvement with a few of the programs. I was primarily working in the Indigenous Women’s Health (IWH) Program with an outstanding team of women! The IWH program had one of the leading Doula programs called the Yiya Vi Kagindi Doula Program. Within the IWH program, I had the opportunity to observe direct service and psychoeducational birthing support classes, as well as advocacy, policy, and outreach pertaining to Indigenous Women’s health and Reproductive Justice.

HIGHLIGHTS

I experienced such a vast diversity of significant experiences because of the people I was able to meet and work with and the spaces in which we worked and collaborated in. First, one of the most significant highlights from my summer at TWU was the overall sense of community and love that the staff and communities served by Tewa Women United extended to me. As a low-income Queer Xicana with my own trauma and histories rooted in oppression, I needed support and space for healing in my work. This was undoubtedly extended to me at TWU. I came in as an outsider and everyone I crossed paths with welcomed me with such appreciation and gratitude. The immense support that was extended to me by the folks at TWU was really what kept me going throughout some tough moments during the summer.
Secondly, I had the opportunity to attend local and state outreach events and/or conferences where I represented TWU or stood with TWU in Albuquerque, Taos, Santa Fe, Sandia Pueblo, Taos Pueblo, Pueblos of Santa Clara, San Juan, Pojoaque, Nambe, and Jemez. Within my first month at TWU, I had attended many different events that really helped me look at the bigger picture of Reproductive Justice and Social Justice work in New Mexico. As the summer went by, I really got to learn many of the interworkings of tribal, state, and national affiliations.

Lastly, I feel that the amount of agency I was given to choose which programs I wanted to work with in addition to the IWH was immensely rewarding in various ways. It was a struggle because I wanted to commit to many events and meetings and I did attend a large variety of events but it also taught me the importance of knowing my boundaries (which I address in the following section).

**CHALLENGES**

Most of my challenges at TWU stemmed from my own lack of communication and stress stemming from my emotional and financial issues. One of the most challenging parts of my internship was trying to manage my own mental health while working thirty to thirty-five hour weeks at the internship. Later on in the internship, I could not fully offer the best version of myself because of much emotional and financial stress that I was experiencing at the time. Contributing factors to my stress were lack of sufficient time management and not fully knowing my boundaries. This was very difficult for me. I
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Summer 2016 placed a great amount of pressure on myself because I wanted to fully embrace every opportunity presented but I quickly learned that this was not feasible. Having weekly check-ins with my supervisor Jessica was very helpful and key in helping me learn how to communicate boundaries and just communicate in general with a supervisor.

EFFECTS ON ACADEMIC/CAREER PLANS

The internship largely impacted my academic and career plans. After the summer, my desire to want to continue with birth justice and reproductive justice work was solidified. Concurrently, my desire to begin envisioning work that truly embodies elements of decoloniality, was also shaped by my work at TWU. Working at a radical Indigenous Women's collective, heightened and extended my own awareness of true social change and opened up possibilities for envisioning what this really looks like.

SELF-GROWTH & CONCLUSION

I learned many important things this summer about myself. I learned the importance of really having boundaries and communicating about them. I learned that my own process of growth is ever-changing and that I should embody patience by being open to whatever comes my way rather than trying to challenge myself. I learned the significance of appreciation and gratitude on every single level for my own healing and this work. I learned more strategies and coping mechanisms for self-love and self-care. I learned to be grateful for and love everyone that is supporting you in your path in this
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moment and to prioritize those folks and their energies. And this might be a little
repetitive, but I learned how there is always more to learn!

In closing, I cannot help but reiterate and express my immense gratitude for all of the
inspiring, motivating, and purely beautiful individuals that I had the privilege of crossing
paths with and working with at TWU and in New Mexico this past summer. Working with
this organization changed my life. My outlook on collective and community healing was
influenced by the folks that I was surrounded by and amidst the work I partook in. This
organization will always be in my heart and I feel abundantly humbled to have been so
welcomed into this space and to have learned so much knowledge from everyone in the
space.