Women With a Vision

My time in New Orleans was spent immersed in culture, food and family life. From the time I touched down, I lived with the Haywood family of which my bosses were the matriarchs. This family business dynamic was pervasive throughout my stay in New Orleans and in the work I did for Women With a Vision.

Woman With a Vision is a tiny non-profit founded in 1991 by Deon Haywood, her mother, Cathrine Haywood, and a friend of the family Danita Muse. WWAV specializes in addressing the needs of those who are underserved in the Black Community (which is of course an underserved community to begin with, particularly Queer female bodied folks, Sex Workers (particularly street prostitutes), homeless and runaway youth, and uninsured women living below the poverty line. My coworkers and I were part of the first staff that the organization had after Hurricane Katrina. This meant that the projects that we were asked to take on reflected the collective nature of the organization.

Before the internship I was excited about the near exact match WWAV was with my interests and what I study at Hampshire. This was certainly apparent throughout the time I spent there and I was able to have a job that really excited me. Direct community outreach affords one the luxury of being almost completely honest with the population you serve. I was able to talk frankly and openly about sex and sexuality, give workshops about specific issues of my choosing and I had the freedom to create educational material that was directly in keeping with causes that I believed in.
The creation of topical programming was my main project at WWAV. This culminated in a series of workshops and outlines of workshops that were open to the community in the Broadmoor section of New Orleans. The workshop that went most successfully was the “Strapping and Packing” workshop on lesbian safer sex. During the workshop, I explained the risk factors associated with different sex acts between female bodied people and how different sex toy materials could increase the risk of infections and STD transmission. Cleaning and protection of bodies and sex toys was also discussed at length. During our training for the workshop we were encouraged to speak in a vernacular, even euphemistically at times. The workshop had an attendance of almost 30 people (large for both the topic at hand and the space) and served as a catalyst for further discussion.

One of the most interesting aspects of Women with a Vision was the collective style of community action. At no time were tasks doled out without proper explanation or without the task being tailored to the interests of the person completing it. The family aspect of the organization allowed my supervisors to get to know me fairly quickly which aided their attempts to match me with projects that I could get excited about. This led to me being able to take notes at meetings with the Louisiana Family Planning board and other important meetings, and my assignment to the task of creating pamphlets and other widely distributed pieces of literature.

Alternative advertising was also a large component of the skills that I learned while at Women with a Vision. The nature of their work revolved around non-traditional hours and underserved clientele which necessitated a different sort of advertising. This was characterized by use of condom bags with extra lube and care sacks (plastic bags full of hygiene needs for
street prostitutes) with little cards in them that provided the names and times of different services. The time I spent interning with Women with a Vision produced a pamphlet on hygiene for people who engage in regular high risk behavior. The pamphlet was detailed and effectively communicated hygiene necessities in a way that was less academic and out of touch.

My proficiency in Microsoft Word and PowerPoint was certainly a strength with the type of work that I was performing at the organization. I sometimes had to look templates up on the website or refer to the guide manual, but for the most part I was able to do most things without much assistance at all. This was refreshing because of the amount of literature I was expected to create. I never felt particularly vexed about the clerical work that I was expected to execute.

The difficulties on my job arose about the difference and region and the barrier between academic language and the language that was most often used at my job. The gay community that I was working in found the theory of queerness isolating and foreign and often saw my perceptions as too far out or radical. This often necessitated the espousal of doctrine that I completely disagreed with, as do most jobs. I never felt excessively compromised by these dialogues but it was certainly new for me to attempt to navigate such conversations in a diplomatic way.

Yet, it was out of these difficulties that I feel I learned about communicating across difference. While these conversations were initially uncomfortable for all parties, through exchange of ideas they quickly became easier to have and more productive. I also learned to complete deadlines more efficiently and ask for what I need more readily through the constant revision process with the supervisors of Women with a Vision.
My stay in New Orleans would probably have been enhanced if I had seen more of the city or gotten out more often. The difference in setting led to me becoming a homebody most of the time. This is not to say that I stayed in the house all of the time, but I mainly engaged in activities with the family that I lived with.

Black Studies and Queer Theory courses and activism helped bridge the gap between my understanding of my own Black Queerness and relating to the people I worked with and for. The class that I feel helped me most explicitly was Queer in Culture which discussed the evolution of Queerness and homolexicons. My career goals were strongly altered by my experience in New Orleans.

My view of what it takes for a nonprofit to be successful has changed greatly in the sense that I can understand now why local organization sometimes work better than behemoth corporate organizations that are far more disconnected from the populations they serve. I learned how important direct outreach can be instead of just dumping buckets of grant money on a problem. Women with a Vision’s efforts to do harm reduction where high risk behavior is concentrated, rather than through grant money or walks for the cure, seem to be more effective in the long run. Their emphasis on nontraditional hours for things like Medicare registration and outreach to street prostitutes is logical and precise and their nonacademic approach to information dispersion is amicable. This is something that I recognized when I was able to speak more to my boss in the spring before I arrived in New Orleans, so my expectation matched my understandings about the organization.
My internship overall was amazingly informative, always challenging and certainly relevant to my interests, career goals and past activism the organization was also a wonderful match for my personality. Women with a Vision was a warm and welcoming organization that graciously allowed me to pursue my interests instead of sitting behind a desk for the entirety of my time working for them. I was trusted with important tasks and new projects at all times. The work atmosphere was direct (occasionally to the point of harshness) and comfortably familial. I was always able to be excited about going to work and that is truly rare.

WWAV’s location and staff were very educated in the idea of social justice from a community standpoint. This was important because often it is assumed that anthropological ideas are inapplicable, or at least off-putting for direct use in the communities. I learned that this is not necessarily the case. My internship also reified the need to address economic justice even when it does not directly relate to social justice.

To future interns, I suggest organization, and a great deal of research on the organization and the area that the organization is in. Those interning with WWAV need to make sure that they are good listeners and able to relate across difference.