This summer was electrifying and magnetic and mind-blowing. Obviously, these are dramatic adjectives, but it really did feel that way to me, and it was all because of this amazing internship. I knew that it was going to entail some growth, perseverance, and maybe a little bit of struggle. Past experiences should keep on teaching me that I should never go into any situation with expectations, and having this internship definitely exceeded any expectations I had about working with this awesome organization this summer.

SisterSong: Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective is a feminist based organization located in southern Atlanta. They have been part of the reproductive justice movement from the time the movement started, so to work at a place that inhabited so much history and power was inspiring in itself. This summer, we had many tasks, but the most brooding and large one was preparing for the STANDING OUR GROUND: For Marissa Alexander and Reproductive Justice. Just to provide some background on who Marissa Alexander is: She is a mother of two, who shot a warning shot in the air to ward off her abusive husband. She didn’t hurt anyone. She used the problematic “Stand Your Ground” defense that is popular in Florida, to say she was defending herself. However she was still sentenced to almost 20 years. The trial recently re-opened, and if she gets convicted again, her sentence could be tripled to 60 years. This is a reproductive justice issue, and the main point of the conference was to accentuate that fact. SisterSong was not only apart of the conference; SisterSong was in charge of it all. The conference was located in Jacksonville, FL, where Marissa Alexander’s hearing was to take place (before the judge denied her request).

It was interesting being involved in the planning of a major reproductive justice conference. There were several tasks that needed to be completed by the staff (only six of us) in order to make sure the conference went smoothly. There were PR tasks, such as emailing press releases and calling news outlets to take on the story. We also had to
handle travel arrangements for all the panelists who were arriving to speak on a variety of reproductive justice issues. Sponsorships were also important, since the organization was lacking in funding. Also, the program book for the conference needed to be compiled with the schedule and flow of the weekend, along with the edited biographies and pictures of the panelists. About 100 t-shirts also needed to be ordered for the attendees of the conference to wear on a march to the courthouse the following Monday. Needless to say, there were a plethora of things to get done. Since there were only three interns, the tasks were split up. Judith (another CLPP intern) handled travel arrangements and hotel reservations with the 15 or so panelists who planned to be in Jacksonville. Shavac (the only male intern) handled anything PR related. He did the emailing and calling of news outlets. He did a great job because by the end of the week, two places had already picked up the story about the weekend in Jacksonville and later BET even picked it up. I handled sponsorships, compiling the program book, and handling the ordering of t-shirts for the conference.

It is amazing how perspective changes the way you look at how planning is done. I’ve been to several conferences, and while I love them, I am very aware of how draining it can be. They are jam-packed filled days of information with statistics and stories and personal truth. It is lovely, but quite heavy on the heart. However, I have gained a newfound respect for anyone who has been responsible for planning a conference. There seems to be an infinite amount of details that go unnoticed if you are just attending a conference. The lighting of a room during a particular segment is important. Making sure we have responsible tech people is important, especially if they are handling power points and other attendees’ presentations. The printing of nametags is also imperative, along with a sub header such as “staff” or “panelist” or “guest” so the attendees can talk to whomever they need in a particular moment of time. The food at the conference also has to be taken into account; we have to make sure we have a variety of options for everyone, such as vegetarian and vegan plates. These little tasks seem so insignificant, but they can become daunting if you leave it for last minute, or if it is just listed on the long task list of things that need to be done before the weekend in Jacksonville took place.

In my tasks, I would say making the program books proved to be more difficult than I expected. A week before the conference, I had not only found a perfect template for the information, the booklet was almost done. I felt excited that I was finishing my task so early. However, this was before we all decided it would be important to have the panelists’ biographies and pictures listed in the pamphlet, along with which panel they were speaking on. Adding all of this information would add at least ten more pages to the pamphlet, and the template I had already completed only had space for nine pages. Admittedly, I was frustrated. The whole pamphlet had to be done over, along with font, and a completely different template. The formatting would have to change, along with the logo and font size. I essentially had three days to find a new template that would not only fit all the new information, but I also had to reformat everything to fit the new booklet. This part was probably the most frustrating part of the summer. However, I remained driven, and found something that worked. I stayed up late, way past my
internship hours to make sure the booklet was completed in time. All in all, it was a success, and I was greatly relieved.

Ordering the t-shirts for the conference was also a task that did not go as smoothly as I anticipated. I looked up a company in Atlanta that had very good reviews on printing t-shirts. After contacting them and figuring out pricing, it seemed like everything would be good to go. However when I sent over our “Standing Our Ground” logo, the company said it was not of a high enough quality, and that it would not look good on the t-shirts. At this point, we were running out of time. A turnaround for printing companies is usually 7 days, at the least, and I had already spent two weeks communicating with a company that was essentially not going to do it. Since it was my responsibility to find a company that was going to get the t-shirts printed in time, I had to come up with something. I researched and finally found another company that was closer to the area I lived in. SisterSong is located about 30-40 minutes (without traffic) away from my house, and the first company I communicated with was right down the street from the organization, so this was convenient. However, I rarely drove to work because of how bad traffic is during the afternoon, the commute becomes almost two hours if I drive; I usually took the train. On top of that, the company I found that was willing to print the t-shirts could only get it done the day before we left for Jacksonville, and it was our only choice, so I had to figure out a way to get us the t-shirts right before we left. That night, after picking up the t-shirts from the company, I drove to Monica’s (the ED of SisterSong) house to drop them off around 11 pm so we could have them just in time before we left the next morning. Essentially, this was another task that was a close call, but ended up being successful. I was beyond ecstatic.

The conference itself was amazing. It was also tiring beyond words. We have such a small staff, so because of that, all hands needed to be on deck at all times. We were in charge of being timekeepers and microphone runners during every panel. I was in charge of taking notes during a Southern Synergy brainstorming session, and capturing every detail. We worked the registration tables to get everyone a nametag and registered. We were also in charge of social media and capturing important moments, tweeting, and bringing attention to the events in Jacksonville. We made gift bags for the panelists, and we picked up some of them from the airport as soon as they arrived. The staff probably got only 4 hours of sleep each night we were in Florida.

The most amazing part of the weekend, in my opinion, was the march that took place on the Monday after the conference. To see so many organizations stand in solidarity with Marissa Alexander was absolutely heart-warming. We all had different signs, some of them saying “We will not be erased” with pictures of Marissa Alexander, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Renisha McBride and other people of color who did not receive justice. We chanted to the courthouse, singing songs, holding hands, and upholding amazing energy the whole day. It was absolutely beautiful. When we got to the courthouse, everyone formed a giant circle and held hands. In the middle of the circle, leaders from various organizations shouted why they were here, and why we all needed to be here. The march was the perfect end to an amazing conference and inspiring weekend.
This internship impacted my life a lot more than I expected. I gained even better organizing skills, and also better calming techniques, because I tend to get stressed easily. I also learned so much more about reproductive justice issues and how that entails social justice. Marissa Alexander’s case is a reproductive justice issue because she was taken away from her kids, because she was deemed as an unfit parent for protecting herself and body, and because she was unable to breastfeed her 9-day old baby. Marissa Alexander’s case is a reproductive justice issue because it exemplifies the criminalization of black mothers within the justice system. The academia and the intersectional ties I learned between social and reproductive justice was not only eye opening, but it ignited the passion I already had about feminist issues. I am not exaggerating when I say that this was one of the best experiences of my life. SisterSong has a special place in my spirit. I am grateful I had this amazing opportunity to work with people who are fighting the system, who make it their life mission to make other lives better. The staff of SisterSong became my family. We held hands and laughed and ate lunch together every day. We were also able to discuss heavy issues and work well together. We also shared appreciation and love and reiterated self-care to someone who looked like they needed it. Having this internship solidified my passion, and it has definitely put me on the path to doing more work like this in the near future. I am immensely awed and inspired by this empowering opportunity and experience.

More information on the RRASC internship program: clpp.hampshire.edu/RRASC