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The Prison Birth Project

The Prison Birth Project: Awesomeness in an Organization

I remember looking over the RRASC application and reading through the internship positions. As I narrowed down the different opportunities, my eyes somehow landed on the Prison Birth Project. After reading the description and looking over the webpage, I had a gut feeling deep within me that I needed to do this.

I began my internship in June with Lisa, the organizational sphere leader of PBP. Lisa, normally the main coordinator of interns and volunteers, was very pregnant at the time of our first meeting, a fact I found very fitting for my overall experience. Two weeks into my internship, Lisa went on maternity leave. In the mix of a new restructure and Lisa going on maternity leave, I was briefly left fending for myself within my role as the PBP’s summer intern. In that short time frame, I learned a lot about myself and my personal work style. I had always thought that I was very experienced at working independently but the beginning of my time at PBP was a real eye opener and showed me how inexperienced I really was. Looking back, I can see my frustrations and see how far they pushed me to become a more independent worker.

Shortly after this time, Eli, a member of the leadership circle, jumped out of the woodwork and to my rescue. Though I was sustaining myself, I am so happy for Eli because I also realized how much more productive work can be if you have someone to bounce ideas off of or check in with about tasks and projects.
During my internship, I used a lot of computer skills. Because PBP is a non-hierarchal leadership system, coordination around items happened most often via email. I can proudly say that I am rather proficient with google docs and all other aspects of google email.

I also built up a lot of skills around organization. Many projects this summer would start with a large scale lens and I had to be able to organize myself in a way which broke down the project to its necessary components.

At first I thought many of my difficulties consisted of not having the support or work environment I had gone into the internship thinking I would have but I realize now that my difficulties were more internalized. It was a lack of confidence in my own abilities. The amazing thing about PBP is that they are amazing. Even with a lack of funding, time, and so many other things that life continuously throws at us, the leaders of the Prison Birth Project are very inspiring people because when working with them you can feel how much love and passion goes into the work they do. I wish I could pinpoint exactly how they did it but through those emotions I found the trust they had with my abilities to be encouraging and a tool to push me over the hump that was the base of ungrounded doubts I had with myself. During the culminating event for my time with Prison Birth Project – at the film screening at Food For Thought Books – I stood up and began facilitating the event and introducing the documentary. I remember looking out into the audience that I had done a lot of work to create and seeing their faces. It was so awesome! They were so happy for me. My voice was shaking and I was nervous about how the rest of the night would prevail but I was confident that I had done things to the best of my ability and for them and finally for myself, that was enough.
Though I hate thinking back to things in life and answering the question “What would I have done differently?,” because it sometimes makes me doubt myself in future situations, I would say that I would have tried harder to break down some of my internalized walls and trusted myself more initially. I mean, I had to go through a process to get to a point so I can recognize the issues I had faced so I’m not sure if things could have been different but I certainly can wish they were and hope future situations I can start from the point of confidence I am at now and work toward gaining even more. My lack of confidence inhibited the work I could have done. For example, if I had the confidence at the beginning of the summer that I could productively work completely independently, I would have wasted less time trying to overcome tasks that I thought I couldn’t do and just get to doing. Though the options are endless, I could have created more events, brought more to the table, or even been able to learn more about how the organization works and keeps working. I allowed my doubts to hinder my potential but I can also look at them retrospectively and allow them to fuel whatever future work I do.

This internship seemed so logical when I first decided to apply. It dealt with health, social justice, and women. All things I have intertwined in my studies at UMass for the last four years. As a student, you are constantly forced into thinking about “the next step”. Everyone wants to know what your next step is and often times you are trying to figure that out as well. We go through these fragile and emotional years, trying to step the right way. The RRASC internship was my “next step”, my step to somehow combine my major, Public Health, with the elective coursework I have been doing with issues of oppression, social justice, and critical pedagogy. This was my concrete evidence that would glue these two things together. It became so much more. It confirmed for me that
the decisions I make don’t have to be final ones. Everything I do can be that “next step” and the pieces will come together somehow. It is my belief that as long as I stay conscious of myself and who I am and follow my heart and passions, I will make the “right” decisions. I had initially gone into working with PBP this summer with expectations of what I wanted to learn and take from this experience. I learned all the logistics of organizing and a lot about the prison system and how it is a huge reflection of the major injustices in our society. I also learned how things sometimes just work themselves out in life. Going into things with specific expectations is unproductive. If you expect too much you can be left disappointed and allow yourself to be pulled down. I think that I have learned the most that, as my life progresses and I work toward my goals, the things I should expect to learn from every experience, regardless of how concrete or abstract it seems at the time.

I am very happy that I got to work with The Prison Birth Project of all the other potential placements. For the past few years I have been taking grassroots organizing classes, learning how to take action around issues of injustice in a way that empowers the community and puts the leadership within the hands that are most affected by the problem. Working with PBP, a new, still in development, organization was an amazing glance into all that it is in creating a new organization. I really felt like I was in the dirt of the action. Things were not always clean and pristine and road bumps came along – systems within the organization that still had yet to be developed. I loved every minute of it because it was so real. I got to see an organization’s struggles and emotions at their most genuine form before they became a model for someone trying to do something similar.
Working with PBP showed me how much things in life and in the work of social justice and reproductive rights are all interconnected. The issues that stem from our current correctional system intertwine with many different identities and their oppressive forces. We can’t just look at issues of race or class or gender or whatever else to solve the injustices that we have in our society currently, we have to look at how they all interconnect and affect each other. The intersections of issues are where change will happen. If we are able to look at the intersections, we will be able to connect not only the issues to each other but also ourselves.

For future RRASC interns my only suggestion is to enter your internship open-minded and willing to trust yourself. You believed you could do this internship, that’s why you applied, remember that when challenges arise. Seek the lesson in everything and you’ll be awesome!