Interning at Women With a Vision

This summer I was fortunate enough to have been chosen to intern with Women With a Vision. There are no words to describe the level of commitment, compassion, and attentiveness that these amazing women show and their relentless efforts to stand up for those marginalized and silenced within their community and around Louisiana. This experience has been life changing, and has been crucial to my identity as a black woman. Women With a Vision is an intersectional feminist organization located in New Orleans, Louisiana, and was started in response to the growing HIV outbreak within the black community that was ignored by the rest of the world. The organization has been a voice for women of color, trans women of color, sex workers and women with several intersecting marginalized identities since 1989.

In terms of my internship most of my work at WWAV consisted of being a support system to the other women in the organization, I worked on a variety of tasks ranging from writing articles, updating contact information, creating archives of resources and information, sitting in on webinars, and smaller supportive tasks such as doing research for coworkers, updating contact cards, and watching children. In order for a non-profit to function like a well oiled machine there needs to be someone to pick up the smaller tasks and be willing to do little things; much of the time those smaller tasks are what keep the organization going and allows the higher up members to be able to focus on more vital tasks. Although my part was small I was satisfied in knowing I help my organization and the members of my team in that way. In the duration of my internship most of my skills were centered around research and data collection, I
compiled quite a bit of resources and gathered information from a lot of places. I also did many focus-based tasks such as sitting in on webinars, addressing letters, and much more. Although my experience was for the most part incredibly positive, one problem that I encountered was not feeling as though there was space for all of the variety that black women come in. I didn’t feel like there was space for black women who had interest, backgrounds, personalities, and styles outside of what most members of the organization liked or valued personally. The organization had a very distinct culture (as all organizations typically do), and although there’s nothing wrong with that, it seemed as though there were times when I felt myself being scrutinized and made fun of for non-work related things that had root in the oppressive idea that black womanhood could only look a certain way. On top of that as we all know doing social justice work can be exhausting and hearing about and witnessing the amount of unjust things done against women of color in this world can take a toll on ones mental health. Sometimes coming to work everyday could be draining and I found it difficult to take care of myself during the week. Fortunately I was able to pick up trick hooping and that helped me work through my frustration, and I became very skilled at it and still do it to this day.

Although there were tough times, the amount of empowerment and enrichment I received from being around these women was insurmountable, one of the biggest highlights of this experience was being able to get to know the amazing and unique women I worked with, and spending each and every day with the amazing people who not only built these communities but have established legacies in them against all oppressive odds. These are the people who made New Orleans, these are the people who have had to fight relentlessly in order to be able to live and exist in the city that they built
and whose stories, rarely get told. Being able to submerge myself in the lives and the experience of other black women was very powerful. Also New Orleans is a beautiful city unlike any other, and experiencing the culture and the food and making new friends was amazing.

One of the most distinctive things I noticed and learned was how racism, transphobia, racialized sexism and overall oppression looked in predominantly white city versus a predominantly black city. I grew up in a predominantly white town in Indiana and seeing how systematic oppression looks in a community with barely any people of color was very different from how it looks in a place where black folk were the majority, also the response and the ability to have enough support and presence to have a response was very different. Because of this I was able to understand oppression in a much deeper way. Oppression has deep roots in every nook and cranny in the country, but there are some specifically deep roots in the south, because of its history with slavery, southern states seem to have a form of racism that has had time to stew (for lack of a better word) and therefore making its legacy much more prevalent, and its ability to effect people much more systematic.

So much of what I witness especially regarding the NOLA police executing extreme predatory racialized sexism against trans women of color who did sex work was eye opening. These horrendous experiences were things I always read about or heard about from other activist but seeing it first hand and hearing the stories of trans women who are preyed on by police is a different experience completely. I have identified as an intersectional feminist for a long time, but having met individuals who have experienced these things first hand and hearing their stories broke a wall for me and
made me understand not only how frequently these things happen but how little they are addressed or even brought up. So many times the narratives and pain of trans women of color (especially those who do sex work) are spoken over, ignored and overpowered by cis women [especially cis white women], and trans women are silenced and pushed out of spaces by non intersectional feminists. Intersectionality is so much more than understanding how oppressions intersect and play off of one another but understanding that if our activism is not reaching the most vulnerable and marginalized of women, its not revolutionary or radical.

Most if not all of my social justice knowledge comes from my own experiences as a black woman, listening to the experiences of other marginalized people, and educating myself, this has led to me being an intersectional feminist and overall activist. As a fine arts major I typically like to describe art as the vehicle in which I convey the experiences of my life and my personal truth. Much of my art revolves around healing from systematic oppression and the various aspects of oppression and the ways in which it affects women of color. Art was a part of my life long before I became a fine arts major, and taking into consideration the fact that I am in a predominantly white program at a predominantly white school, its safe to say that my studies have played a very large part in my activism and therefore my internship. Fine arts has helped me explore the different ways in which I can artistically articulate my experiences as a women of color through a variety of mediums, and in that way, my studies have contributed to my expression of my experiences and frustration, but like I stated before most of my activism and education as an activist has been my own doing and the doing of those kind enough to share their experiences with me. Surprisingly this is an incredibly common narrative, as secondary
education institutions are major perpetrators of social justice issues and much of the time within our own program we find ourselves educating ourselves and becoming better activists in spite of our programs, but not because of them. With that being said I am extremely satisfied with my career choice and hope to use my art to continue my narrative as an intersectional activist. Beside a few Photoshop projects here and there I did very little with my artistic abilities and mostly did more smaller tasks, but with that being said, art remained a way in which I dissected my experiences at this organization. Although art will be my main focus, because of this internship I would like to incorporate some form of minor in relationship to activism, such as Women, Gender and Sexuality studies, or Human Rights. Also at some point after college I would like to return to New Orleans and seek out more opportunities in the realm of intersectional feminism and especially the stopping of gentrification.

Overall I had an amazing experience and am so glad I got to spend my summer with such powerful and influential women. I loved this organization and wouldn’t change my experience for anything. If I had to give advice to future interns coming to WWAV it would be to deeply dissect what self care and recharging looks like for you; social justice work is difficult, especially in the south, and although we always speak of self care, we often don’t realize its true importance and what it can actually look like in practice. Self care looks different for every person and is a lot more than simply taking a nap or cleaning your room, or getting groceries (although those things are important.) make sure that you are being kind to yourself and taking care of yourself mentally and emotionally and knowing your limits. Activism is powerful and necessary and you are your greatest tool! You need to take care of yourself before changing the world.