Naja Sobers  
New York Civil Liberties Union

My Life as an Intern

After weeks of anticipation and anxiety, I was accepted to participate in the Reproductive Rights Activist Service Corp as an intern with the New York Civil Liberties Union. I was tickled, elated, and totally overwhelmed. The idea of moving to the big city for ten weeks was nerve-wracking, but I decided that the opportunity was too good to pass up. I packed my bags and moved to Brooklyn. Looking back, it was one of the best decisions I have ever made.

My first day of work was quite memorable. I had no idea what to expect so I planned everything out. I planned exactly which train I’d take and factored in some time for delays, I planned how I would introduce myself to staff members, and I planned exactly where I would go during the lunch break. I was way over-prepared. The train was perfectly on time which meant that I was forty-five minutes early, the staff was welcoming and relaxed so my formal introduction was useless and the organization took all of the new interns out to lunch. The other interns and I were given a thorough orientation. We discussed the many causes to which the NYCLU is committed and met the staff members of the organization. We were all welcomed with open arms and regarded as assets and equals. I immediately felt calm and comfortable. We were also given a tour and provided an explanation of how the organization is structured into departments and projects. Following, our roles and responsibilities were described.

As a member of the reproductive rights project, my main task of the summer was to catalogue the sexuality education curriculum of New York State’s middle and high schools. This task was especially interesting to me. I had always been interested in sex education and was excited for the opportunity to read what is currently in being used in school systems. I was also responsible for assisting the Teen Health Initiative, NYCLU’s youth peer education program, in
its projects. By far, this became my favorite “responsibility.” Working with this group of approximately 15 proactive teenagers was such a joy. It was always the highlight of my day and became the highlight of my experience.

At the end of ten weeks I had catalogued the curriculum of approximately ten districts, created two information sheets to be used as guidelines during the analysis of curricula relating to sexually transmitted infection and contraception, and aided in the Teen Health Initiative’s completion of a ‘zine describing New York City’s high school admissions process. Additionally, I co-facilitated two workshops with my supervisor Karyn Brownson and led a third workshop on my own. Early on, I was informed that I could work on any project I desired, regardless of its relation to reproductive rights. Therefore, I also assisted the NYCLU during Brooklyn and Queens Pride, helped with the judging of the NYCLU’s Freedom of Expression Contest and staffed the events of the Young Professionals, a group of people from ages 22 to 40 who have an interest in the protection of civil liberties. I am proud of what I was able to complete.

Much of my achievements during the internship were due to skills I already had. The skill that I used the most was communication. Communication is key in any field, but it was especially important during this experience. I relied on my communication skills during the many meetings I attended, the seemingly endless number of emails I sent, as well as the workshops in which I participated. Moreover, it was important that I used my communication skills when addressing my concerns and making my needs known. This can be quite a challenge but is an important part of being a self-aware, self-sustaining adult. Another very important skill I used was my ability to research. As previously mentioned, I took on tasks that were outside of my usual area of study and joined in on conversations regarding issues I had never before contemplated. To stay informed and up to speed required extensive research of the issues. I also used my ability to research to create the information sheets needed for document analysis.
Without these previously acquired skills I would not have had the same magnitude of the success.

Although my time was successful, I did have some minor difficulties during the ten weeks. Staying motivated was a continuous trial. This was due to a few factors. First, there were very few deadlines for projects and I am deadline oriented. I was not used to this lack of accountability. Moreover, the environment that I was in made concentration especially difficult. My desk was located in a room with seven other interns. They all had larger than life personalities and brilliant minds. We all became great friends. The only problem was that many of our conversations, although relating to civil liberties, were at the expense of our assignments. I had to remind myself of the end goal and objectives to stay motivated. I used this idea most often when cataloguing documents. The end goal, comprehensive sex education free of gender bias or heterocentricity, was always enough to keep me on task.

Being able to successfully self motivate was one of the three most important skills I improved upon. Another was the ability to think critically about a range of social injustices in the community, not just those under the umbrella of reproductive rights. The work that I did in the community helped me to realize just how connected the issues are and see the big picture.

Finally, I left the internship feeling capable of anything- both in terms of my role in future social justice initiatives as well as being able to adapt to a new environment. There were a few inspirations for this feeling. First, after learning about the history of the New York Civil Liberties Union, hearing its success stories, and being a part of a few I have a better understanding of the great things that can be done with a lot of passion, innovative thinking and a little effort. I was also inspired by my own contributions. The work that I completed during the internship may someday impact New York State Legislature and consequently have an impact on the life of a child. Next, I would have never thought that I would be able to adapt to a new city so
easily. The fact that I was able to will greatly reduce potential moving anxieties and will help me take advantage of all future opportunities.

In terms of academics, my background in sociology and health education, as well as my recent study of health policy prepared me for the internship. My study of sociology assisted my critical thinking of social structure and the problems within it, and my background in health education helped me to jump right into workshop facilitation. Likewise, my study of policy helped me understand current practices and add valuable input to conversation.

I had never expected that my experience with the NYCLU would be so eye-opening and motivating. Not only do I have a new perspective of social justice issues and strategies in which to solve them, but I also have new thoughts about my role in the fight towards reproductive justice. My goal of becoming a health educator has not changed, but the magnitude of my goal has. I would not only like to educate within in an organization, I would like to create my own organization. Prior to my time in New York I would have thought this to be too grand an idea. Now I understand that every organization, every peer education group, no matter how big or small, was born from an idea. My idea is to create a peer education program in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. I am very connected to the city of Woonsocket and have seen, firsthand, its need for a program like the many peer education programs I visited in New York City. It will not happen overnight, but with effort it will happen. All in all, the experience was far more beneficial that I had expected.

I loved the New York Civil Liberties Union. The office was extremely relaxed and friendly. The staff was brilliant, yet open-minded and caring – never too desensitized by the issues to remember their impact on human life. The organization’s approach to interdepartmental meetings was resourceful in that it made use of every available individual’s perspective and specialty. Moreover, the organization used levelheaded tactics. They would not only rely on what
was right, but what was constitutional and legally just. I respected this approach. Last but most certainly not least, the NYCLU always made sure to act in a manner that was professional, but appropriate for the intended audience.

My internship was wonderful. The organization made sure to expose me to as much as I was willing to take in and trusted me to make my own decisions about how I would use my time. I had heard horror stories about internships in which the intern’s role was nothing more than an extra hand at the copy machine. One day when my supervisor and I were returning from a workshop, we discussed this common issue. In response she simply stated, “That is not what an intern is for.” She always made sure that my assignments were meaningful and educational. Thanks to her efforts I was able to learn so much more about the reproductive rights of minors in New York and their intersection with social justice.

I had a great experience largely because I entered my new environment with an open mind and few expectations. I would suggest that any student planning to take part in this internship do the same. I would also suggest that potential interns, from the moment they know which city they are destined, research local laws, policies, and social norms. This will not only help the intern to be informed and valuable, but it will also help to reduce some of the stress of adjusting to a new area. Finally, I would suggest that interns reach out to their RRASC peers to give and receive support. Adapting to a new organization and environment can be intimidating. Just remember that you are not the first to do it and you are not alone.