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Safe Passage  
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This summer, I worked at Safe Passage, which offers services to survivors of domestic violence – women, men and trans* people – in the Hampshire County area of Massachusetts. Safe Passage offers a crisis hotline, disability services, and a shelter. Safe Passage’s shelter serves people who are in an abusive relationship that poses an imminent risk of death or injury.

The beginning of my internship started with an interview with Laura, the supervisor of volunteers and interns. Laura asked me various questions about domestic violence and told me that I would need to attend a four week long training on domestic violence before I could start direct service. I felt excited and motivated to start work at Safe Passage after my interview with Laura.

The four week training at Safe Passage started at the beginning of June. Each week consisted of talking about different aspects of domestic violence work. Some of the highlights of the training include an anti-oppression training, information about the crisis hotline, disability services, and issues that concern Latinas and other immigrant women in the United States. I found the training to be intensive, informative, and at times triggering. Along with other volunteers, I attended Safe Passage’s annual meeting at Smith College. It was really great to meet the staff and board members of Safe Passage, and afterwards we went on a tour of Safe Passage’s shelter. I started direct service the following Monday.
My first day of direct service at Safe Passage’s office was both exciting yet somewhat disappointing. I was hoping I could work collaboratively on the Prevention Campaign, but I ended up being assigned to various other projects, including data entry. I mostly worked on data entry for the first week, but eventually Laura and I set a time to discuss what kinds of projects I could work on.

Laura and I talked two days later about what I could tackle. She suggested that I could start on two binder projects. One binder would be a map of downtown Northampton. My job would be to locate specific places on the map important for shelter residents to know about. The second binder would have various bus schedules in the Pioneer Valley. The projects were important and I enjoyed creating them, but I finished them in about a week. I approached Laura the second week of my direct service and asked if there were any research projects I could conduct for Safe Passage. Laura said that she would touch base with Marianne, Safe Passage’s executive director, to see what kind of research projects would be beneficial to the organization. In the meantime, I focused my energies on helping with childcare and organizing rooms at the shelter.

My first day helping with childcare at the shelter was great. The children were very receptive to playing and getting along with each other. I took the children to the pond at Smith College with the help of another intern. All of the children seemed really excited to get out of the shelter, especially since they spend so much time indoors. It was nice to get to know each child and talk with them about things that are not as heavy as domestic violence. I continued to look forward to child care throughout my internship.

Laura approached me my second week at the office about doing a research project for Marianne. Marianne was scheduled to testify at a gun legislation hearing at American
International College in Springfield, MA on August 2nd. Laura asked me to do research for Marianne since she had a lot of other things to carry out within Safe Passage. I was happy to do the research and excited to be attending the hearing with Marianne. I felt like it was a great opportunity to reach out into the community about issues concerning weak gun laws and their connection to domestic violence and homicide. I started my research right away.

I spent the next few weeks doing data entry, research, volunteer work, and helping out at the shelter. There were many moments where I felt great about the work I was doing and other times where I felt like there was a lack of support. The days that I worked on the crisis hotline were fulfilling because I felt like I was helping women in crisis, even if they were chronic callers who did not seem like they were making emotional progress. I felt like there was less support when I was working the front desk in the office. This might have been due to my insecurity about interrupting people in the middle of their work. As the internship progressed, I was able to break out of my shell and ask staff questions. In hindsight, I realize that I should have used my voice more and been more assertive in the office when I didn’t feel supported.

At the end of July I helped Safe Passage table during the Northampton Sidewalk Sale. Other volunteers and I asked people walking by to “say something” about domestic violence and how it has impacted their lives as part of our prevention program. Many people seemed uncomfortable talking about domestic violence in public, which was expected. There were some who felt domestic violence was something that needed to be discussed in depth in our society. It was a great experience and I was able to connect with one of the recently hired staff members.
I started to feel a mixture of nervousness and excitement in the week leading up to the gun legislation hearing at American International College. The day before the hearing I received a call from Marianne. Marianne said that she had a family emergency and would not be able to be at the legislation hearing. I was asked to testify in her place. I felt nervous about doing this, but also confident that I could. I have spoken in front of hundreds of people in the state house and also on Holyoke Community College’s campus. I told Marianne that I would do it and sent her my revised copy of the testimony, which I would deliver.

The morning of the gun legislation hearing at American International College was an interesting experience. There were three Peter Pan busses that brought employees from Smith and Wesson to the hearing. There was one man in particular who stood out from the crowd. He wore an American flag polo shirt and later when he spoke talked about how gangs are ruining this country. Many of the white men who spoke at the hearing discussed gun violence as if it is the fault of black and brown gangs, although white men commit most gun violence. There was hardly any discussion about how weak gun laws contribute to domestic violence and homicide.

I did not testify until mid-afternoon, so I was able to hear most of the testimonies given. A majority of the testimonies included pro-gun folks who worked for or were connected with Smith and Wesson. Smith and Wesson was not being specifically attacked in any of the proposed gun bills, so it was interesting to see so many of them come out in protest. Many of the folks urging the state legislature not to implement these proposed bills used racism as a platform. There was a lot of coded language about gangs and urban violence and their contribution to hurting “law-abiding citizens’” right to have
guns in their home. I felt a lot of emotions before I was scheduled to speak, but when the state legislature called me up to testify I was ready.

As one of the few people who discussed issues of gun violence and its relation to domestic violence and homicide, I felt it was useful to lay out statistics, such as “the presence of a gun in the home increases the risk of domestic homicide in an already abusive relationship by 500 percent.” After reading this and statistics like it there was a group of men behind me who said, “that’s not true.” I think this experience speaks to larger issues of gender and race inequity in our communities. Many of those who testified before and after me spoke of urban violence outside of the context of racism and poverty. After I testified many people came up to me and said how glad they were that I spoke about domestic violence issues. I was happy to provide another perspective. Unfortunately, domestic violence is a topic too often overlooked when discussing gun violence and gun control.

I returned to the office the next week and talked to Marianne about how the testimony went. Marianne seemed grateful that I was able to be in her place at the hearing and I was honored to have the opportunity to do so. During my last week I finished the data entry project and helped out at the shelter. During my last day at the shelter I said goodbye to the residents and their children. It was a bittersweet moment, especially since one of the residents was moving within the week. I was glad to see that this resident would rebuild a life free of violence.

I learned many things from my time at Safe Passage. I grew from the experience of adapting to a new environment and creating conversations around trauma. There were many moments that I will cherish, such as the children always asking questions about the
world and resident parents trusting me enough to share their personal trauma with me.

My intern experience at Safe Passage was memorable and I encourage other social and reproductive activists to be active in domestic violence organizations in their communities.