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RRASC 2013 Final Report

Having only worked on abortion issues before this summer, I found myself quite lacking in knowledge about classism, but I was excited when assigned to intern at Class Action this summer. After ten weeks, I was proud to say that I have accomplished a lot: I have made friends with people I never would have otherwise, I’m aware of a whole range of issues associated with class and classism, and I’ve grasped a hold of how a non-profit organization works and how they make connections with the community. I also participated in activities in and out of the office with my fellow interns, and realized that even though they are all younger than me, I actually learned a lot from them.

I have read a few reports written by past Class Action interns, and they all cite the weekly meetings as one of the highlights of their experience; for me, it meant a lot. Both interns and the staff take turns to facilitate the meetings. I had the chance to facilitate two out of ten meetings – the first on issues of abortion and the second on problems associated with mental illnesses and treatment for low income people. As the facilitator, I first had to send out articles for everyone to read, and in the meeting we would take turns to reflect on what we had read and expand on the topic based on our own knowledge and experiences. As an international student, I more often than not had different opinions than my fellow interns, but that is how I learned to contribute to the diversity of the office and my own development. After
the meetings, I realized that I gained my fair share of knowledge about the most prominent issues in American society. More importantly, I felt more prepared to speak up, to voice my opinion and to ask questions, which are skills valuable to my studies and future career.

The first project assigned to me was sorting out the past gigs that Class Action had accumulated over the years in alphabetical order. The work itself was not difficult, but required some patience and attention to details. Anne, my advisor, was kind enough to help me come up with a checklist of items to be included in one standard file. A majority of the files don’t have all items we needed, maybe because we had lost them, or because they were still in use. All in all, I had to make do with what I had, and hoped that whoever continued my work would perfect the files. I became aware that even though this was purely administrative work, it really helped referencing jobs easier in the future.

Another task listed in this project was to finding out whatever I could about workshop attendees and past donors, who more often than not forgot to fill out the forms we provide. Most people have a LinkedIn profile with updated information about their email/physical address, their current job/project and their organization, but some people just cannot be found online. My next step was to contact people who had organized the workshop and ask for their help to fill in the blanks in our database. However, this job turned out to be not as easy as I had imagined, mostly because the organizers knew no more than I did, or because they did not feel comfortable with disclosing personal information. This meant that I could not update our database. However, this little issue did not overall trump the positive
experiences I had. I learnt how valuable connections are to every organization, especially to one as small as Class Action. I found out, through skimming one evaluation after another by workshop attendees, how participants’ eyes were opened to current class issues and how grateful they feel for being able to attend a Class Action workshop. I also became aware of various class issues, which are just as persistent and complicated as race and gender issues.

Halfway through my internship, the other interns and I had a chance to attend a real Class Action workshop. This meant that I had a chance to observe the result of what I had contributed to, and to meet people and hear their stories. The workshop was free, but everyone donated as much as they could. Our facilitator, Beth, organized a few activities that really helped warm up the atmosphere in the room. I could sense that classism is a very sensitive issue, but as Beth began to share her class background, everyone immediately felt the connection and started to discuss their experience. I remember us talking about how classism is the new “acceptable” discrimination, how the physical facts of life are all allocated by class, and how wealth has shaped our perspectives growing up. To me, the highlight of the workshop was that people come from various backgrounds, but they all agree to not take their privileges for granted and to treat others with respect. By the end, I gathered quite a lot of stories on classism. However, I wished that Beth could have given us some advice on how to cope with classism in the office; we had a great time pointing out the problems, but I did not feel satisfied with the conclusions drawn.
Another project I was assigned was to update the Class Action website. A lot of the links had expired or led to another website, or some bloggers’ names were not entered into the database. My job was to fix all the links and update our database, which took me quite a long time to finish. Having done this, I moved on to another project: searching for NGOs that we may potentially forge links with in the future. My other jobs included helping Liz prepare for the workshops, reorganizing payments, mailing letters, and other trivial office tasks.

Overall, my internship was very rewarding and loaded with positive experiences. I could not have done it without the help of my very passionate and helpful fellow interns, who were always so ready to discuss any problem I came across. My two supervisors, Anne and Liz, also helped my transition into the office environment go smoothly. Anne was always preoccupied with something, but she never failed to take a break to answer my questions.

Of course, I wished that I could have done more during my time at Class Action. As an administrative intern, I learned how a non-profit organization operates, but I wished I had contributed to what they were actually doing. I missed the chance to participate in the interns’ workshop and could not write a blog post for the website. However, my work during this summer was the kind of work that I could imagine myself doing in the future, which is to ensure that an office runs smoothly and to help people navigate their social problems more effectively. This internship also helped me narrow down the areas that I should study during my last year at Mount Holyoke College.
Classism is a complicated issue that is difficult to explain, yet remains quite pervasive in American society. I just hope that with all the knowledge, skills and connections that I’ve been equipped with, I can continue to work at an NGO that addresses class issues and eradicates them to a certain extent.