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The Trans Buddy Program through the Vanderbilt Program for LGBTI Health
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If I had to use one word to describe my summer internship with Trans Buddy, it would be: seismic. Seismic in my life, that is. Working for a program within Vanderbilt University required me to stretch and grow in more ways than one. Not only did I attain useful skills; I also came to a place of healing that made it easier for me to serve my community and ultimately serve myself. Overall, I would say that my experience working for The Trans Buddy program was (from a scale of poor to excellent) fair.

The Trans Buddy Program through the Vanderbilt Program for LGBTI Health is a student-led organization in Nashville, Tennessee that focuses on two things: patient advocacy and education on the intersections between health care and the transgender community. As a full-time intern, it was my responsibility to go through the 16-hour training that is required of all new volunteers before I could start participating in their on-call service. But before I could delve into that, I had to step through the doors of Vanderbilt University and fill out paperwork designated for new hires. Even as a RRASC intern, I was no exception. I mention this incident because it happened exactly around the same time as the split between Vanderbilt University and Vanderbilt University Medical Center, and that created some problems for me. Because of this new split, policies for new hires had changed. Apparently, any new hires for Vanderbilt (whether the university or the medical center) were required to have medical insurance before they could start working; as an uninsured, full-time student, I was already encountering barriers that could have prevented me from making real change in the community! I had to let them know that there
was no way I was going to be able to afford paying for health insurance from the marketplace and survive living in a new city with a flat stipend. Arrangements were made and I was able to start working with Trans Buddy. With that said, Vanderbilt stopped checking on whether or not I had health insurance; I cancelled my plan with the marketplace soon after I started working.

The tasks and projects I worked on during the summer were numerous. A lot of the work I was doing, aside from the on-call part of the job, was self-started. The first project I was assigned to was making a PowerPoint presentation about transgender coverage through Medicaid and comparing the programs state-by-state. The purpose of this presentation was to show TennCare (Tennessee’s Medicaid program) officials the statewide benefits of including and covering transgender-specific expenses. Although I don’t know what came from the meeting, I was told that it was conducive and taught representatives quite a bit. The second project I worked on was a case study. I was asked to look at different programs across the country that focused on transgender advocacy and do a compare and contrast. From what I gathered, no other organization works from the model that we do, and our patient-centered approach is unique. However, multiple friends of mine across different states have been so inspired by the work that we do that they used grants to start their own chapters on their college campuses! Lastly, I was able to work on uplifting the newly established Vanderbilt support group for HIV+ transgender women in Nashville. My role was to act as an organizer and shadow the social worker who led the free support group. Since the group was barely getting started, I functioned as a bridge between what staff and patients needed, as well as overseeing any technicalities that could take this group even further. So far, the group has hosted four women each month, and I expect the
numbers to continue growing. Overall, my projects were challenging and interesting; I’m thankful that they believed in me enough to let me work on them independently.

The skills I used most often in my internship included delegating tasks, creating and presenting educational materials, and relationship building within the community. However, the skill that I think was most valuable was learning to listen to those at the margins. The trans community is vast, and they’re hurting. I learned to make space for them, step back, and give them the floor. This leads me to the highlight of my internship experience. A couple of weeks before my internship ended, I received a call from the Children’s Department at the Vanderbilt Psychiatric Ward, asking if a buddy could visit with one of their patients. It was pouring outside, a party I RSVP’d to was about to take place, and I wasn’t supposed to be on-call. I went to the hospital anyway, not knowing that my life would be different after meeting with them. I spent some time with Benedict, a sixteen year-old trans boy who just needed to talk with someone they could trust. I learned about their likes and dislikes, what their coming out journey was like, and how they felt being inside of a psychiatric ward while being trans. It was a deeply humbling experience, and it made me realize that all of these years of undergraduate studies in the Women’s and Gender Studies department at ASU were finally being applied, and that I wanted to continue my post-secondary education in the field of social work. Theory, I realized, is only useful when turned into praxis. Trans Buddy gave me the opportunity to do just that.

Although there were wonderful moments within my internship, I also encountered several difficulties. The first was the lack of a Trans Buddy “space.” I was looking forward to working at an office or a front desk of some sort, but the program lacked a home base. I had to work remotely, and even though it didn’t necessarily affect the work I did, I felt like I didn’t have a
safe space to meet with Trans Buddy volunteers and my supervisor. If I had a question or needed some time to recalibrate or rejuvenate, I didn’t have the luxury other interns had of going to their host organization’s site location. Trans Buddy was a student-led organization that didn’t receive any funding, and therefore had trouble establishing roots at Vanderbilt, regardless of all the amazing work they did. Another difficulty was happening internally; leadership within Trans Buddy was changing drastically, and they were on the verge of ending the program. Staff had conflicting views and tactics, and it made me feel uncomfortable being in the middle of it all. As an intern, I had to learn how to navigate conflicts and lack of communication between members. Furthermore, I had to come to terms with the fact that we were working out of a large and powerful institution, and that continuing to make services available to patients meant being compliant with Vanderbilt employees who were “above us.” Ultimately, I was able to brush most of it off and focus on who I was meant to be serving and making them a priority. I also want to mention that the Trans Buddy Program made efforts to create a long-term, paid position and Vanderbilt is now hiring!

This internship was only ten weeks long, but it made me feel solid in my career goals. I’d like to pursue a Master’s in Social Work immediately after I graduate, focusing on policy, nonprofit management, and community organizing. I came to the conclusion that the work Trans Buddy does requires a clinical social worker. Volunteers can’t do everything that a licensed social worker can, and that’s the honest truth. Like social workers, social justice and reproductive rights are at the core of the work that I do, and Trans Buddy only solidified my desire to continue working on these issues. It also fueled my passion for LGBTQ organizing and fighting for queer and trans liberation. The trans community is at the margins and needed justice
years ago. In the context of health care, trans individuals are disproportionately lacking access to proper and safe health care, and I’m fortunate that I was given the opportunity to try to change that. I’ve also thought about becoming a state representative and running for office with queer and trans liberation, access to health care as a human right, and reproductive justice as my platform (I can dream, right?!). After this internship, I realized that the world is my oyster, and I can use the experience I was given this summer to make meaningful change. At the end of it all, the goal of fighting oppression is to work myself out of a job.

I think that the Trans Buddy Program through the Vanderbilt Program for LGBTI Health is starting off on the right foot and is absolutely necessary in the community. However, they need to sort out their internal and external goals before they can effectively reach the trans community, and I knew I wasn’t going to solve that as an intern. My position gave me insight into what it takes to run a nonprofit organization and work within an academic and medical institution. I’m ever-grateful to my supervisors and the RRASC/CLPP staff for giving me this opportunity. As an ally/sibling to the trans community, I’ll continue doing whatever it takes to support and uplift my trans brothers and sisters. To potential interns: practice humility, and let the water take you to a place of wisdom and deep compassion at the end of the summer. Find refuge in the fact that you are a small piece in something much larger than yourself, something that only serves to do good. If you feel unsupported during your internship, please let your RRASC family know. Most of all, have fun! Reproductive justice and social justice work is tough; stay lighthearted and remember that justice is coming!