Mac Chambers – Pride Center of Vermont

I spent my internship at the Pride Center of Vermont, in Burlington, Vermont. I primarily worked in the Health and Wellness program, but I also did projects with the SafeSpace coordinators and some smaller projects around the center. Because I was in Health and Wellness but functioning within the community center, I had the chance to take part in a variety of projects. Along with day to day and longer term projects, I also helped out with several bigger events over the summer.

In the Health and Wellness office, I did a lot of projects that involved health education and outreach. One of the first things I did was put together a health and wellness board and table for the center. I printed out lots of colorful infographics about healthy living and put them out with some materials that HealthLink sent the center, like sunscreen and cancer awareness pamphlets. When the director asked me to put the board together, I thought it would be quick, fun project. It was fun, but I also realized that there are lots of health issues that intersect with being LGBTQ+ and that it was really important to validate those and not to ignore them. After doing some research and looking at what HealthLink (an LGBTQ+ health organization) publishes for education and awareness, I was able to put together a list of possible topics to put on the board. I ended up doing some seasonal infographics (sunscreen and drinking enough water), physical activity ideas like easy exercises and stretches, and a couple posters about getting the right amount of sleep and simple ways to work fruits and vegetables into your diet. I also found some LGBTQ+ specific infographics to feature on the board. One involved smoking, an addiction that disproportionately affects the LGBTQ+ community. Another poster was about health disparities in the trans community. Lack of awareness and access to good healthcare is a
A huge problem for the LGBTQ+ community, so I tried to be mindful of that while making the board.

I did a lot of outreach for the Health and Wellness program. I did research on Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis and syphilis for awareness campaigns. Because the Pride Center is an HIV testing center and I worked in the same office as where records are kept, I went through the process of PEMS certification so I could work around confidential testing records. Towards the end of the summer, I did data entry with the testing numbers for one of the annual grants that the center received. I also helped write an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) between the center and another local organization.

When I wasn’t working on projects specifically for the Health and Wellness program, I had time to help out with other things for the center. I learned how to use the blogging and calendar program that hosts the center’s website. After figuring out all of the forms, I got pretty good (and efficient!) at blogging events and news for the center. I posted a lot about the Vermont Diversity Health Project, an online directory of LGBTQ+ health providers in Vermont, and about an LGBTQ+ wellness survey that the department of health was circulating. I also blogged about events that were hosted by the Pride Center and sometimes by other organizations. I ended up learning a lot about Vermont’s queer community and social events.

Along with the Pride Center’s blog, I also posted on the Pride Center’s Facebook page, Twitter feed, and I ran their Instagram account for the summer. Being active on social media was a lot of fun and felt really validating because all of the “likes” and retweets illustrated community involvement and support. As a community center, we had a physical community that we interacted with in person, but it was awesome to see evidence of our community online too.
As a RRASC intern, I had some projects and tasks that were built into my job description. One of the projects was putting together events for the “Summer Semester” at the center. I made a survey and circulated it online to get an idea of what fun events people wanted to see from the center over the summer, like yoga, book groups, or hiking. Because of the way the summer unfolded, I didn’t get to do very many Summer Semester events, but they were still a lot of fun to do. I organized the annual “Queer Invasion of the Dog Park”, where queer folks could meet up at the dog park and get to know each other while their dogs played. Our first date got rained out, but we eventually got some folks together and I think everyone had fun!

Another one of my specifically RRASC projects was to facilitate the Trans Town Halls that took place at the center. Trans Town Halls involve a central theme (like navigating healthcare or something fun like a spa day) and we bring in panelists (like doctors, folks who have experience with getting a new birth certificate, or aestheticians) to speak to the trans community about the theme. After the panelists speak, the audience can ask them questions, and then everyone can mingle afterwards. My role was mostly to organize the events, coordinate panelists and volunteers, and to get word out to the community. It was a little intimidating at first because I wasn’t sure how I, a cisgender person and a new intern, would fit into the coordination, but I had some great meetings with the other people involved with hosting Trans Town Halls and felt better after I learned about what I needed to do. Unfortunately, due to other events this summer, the center didn’t actually host a Trans Town Hall during my time there, but I did help to organize a related meeting of the Trans Community Program.

The TCP is a community based program that brings trans folks and allies together to plan events, like Trans Town Halls or other events. The work I did for the Trans Town Halls progressed naturally into work for the Trans Community Program. I ended up organizing and
taking notes for several TCP meetings at the center. The first one I attended was also the first TCP meeting that had happened in a long time, and it was really great to see a new era of TCP members come together. By the end of the summer, the TCP had a new facilitator and had organized an event for Pride Vermont in September!

Another group I helped to start was the center’s LGBTQ+ PoC social and support group. After Orlando, someone in the community expressed interest in starting a space just for queer people of color and I immediately volunteered to help out. I wrote up the description of the group and promoted it over social media and throughout the community. I also co-facilitated the first couple of meetings. I am really proud of my involvement with this group. I think that it provides an important safe space for QPoC people in a state that can feel really unsupportive and unsafe to people of color.

I also helped out with some bigger events at the Pride Center. My first week, I jumped right into my internship by helping out with the center’s annual community celebration that was happening at the end of the week. I got to know my coworkers as we worked on projects like putting together the raffle and learned about the community as I put together the slideshow and sponsor photos.

Unfortunately, our next two events were not joyful gatherings. In May and then June, the Pride Center of Vermont organized memorials for Amos Beede, a trans man who was murdered in Burlington, and then for the victims of the Pulse shooting in Orlando. Both events were heartbreaking and sobering to work on. There was a lot of grief and a lot of pain over these senseless killings. The planning and aftermath of these two events took a lot of organization and emotional and physical work. This meant that a lot of my planned intern projects were set aside so I could help out with organizing; my summer ended up looking a lot different than I initially
imagined it. And that is okay. I learned a lot about organizing and about advocacy through my more “intern-y” duties, but I also learned about what communities need when they grieve and about the importance of community in times of healing. And as a queer person of color who left most of my support at school, there is nowhere I would have rather been and no better group of people to process and move forward with than the folks at the Pride Center of Vermont.

I learned so much at the Pride Center and developed skills I already had. I learned about collaborating with others. Sometimes the things we worked on together were broad, like an agenda for an event we were leading together, and sometimes we had to focus on minutiae like when we co-wrote letters to the community. When I wasn’t working on a project with other people, I was strengthening my discipline while I tackled individual projects. Because someone could walk through the door at any point and ask me to do something, I had to be able to maintain my focus away from my workspace and pick my work back up when I returned. This also helped me develop my patience. When I had two or three people asking me to do something and I had to get feedback from one of them even though they were busy, my sense of patience came in really handy. And when I got really frustrated, my empathy helped me to maintain perspective and not get too angry. I also gained some practical skills that will look good on my resume and that will come in handy for my future projects. Blogging and posting on social media are two such skills. Learning to navigate web hosts and calendar programs can be confusing at first, but will be valuable skills when I work on other websites in the future. Social media management is also a really useful skill. Now I know about photo editing programs, how to use Facebook’s page manager, and how to reach out to people over social media, all skills that I have already put to use at the organizations that I am part of at school.
My advice for future RRASC interns would be to stay empathetic and patient and to take good care of yourself. Find people to lean on and to talk to about healing and about your victories. Document the cool, earth moving things that you’re doing so that you can come back to them to process and remember. It is also important to speak up when you need help or guidance. Advocating for yourself will help you become a better advocate yourself. It’s perfectly fine to ask your supervisor to sit down with you and talk out a plan or problem that you’re having.

I am so grateful for the summer I spent with the Pride Center of Vermont. I built a lot of friendships, learned a lot about myself, and became a stronger activist and advocate. Before interning at the center, my knowledge about the needs and realities of the LGBTQ+ community was limited to my brief personal experience and the things I was learning at school. While theory has its uses, spending time with real people and listening and learning from them is infinitely more valuable to me. I learned that there aren’t always easy solutions to problems and that there is more to advocacy than giving it a name and filing it away among other theories. I witnessed the reality of queerness as it intersected with other systems that everyday people have to interact with on a daily basis. Spending my summer at the Pride Center of Vermont also helped me realize that I want to work with and advocate for my communities in a much more hands on way than I had thought. Working with awesome staff members on education and advocacy gave me a sense of purpose and energy that I will always want to feel when I walk into work. Knowing this about myself, I have been able to adjust the classes I’m taking at school and more strategically plan for my future job.

I think that I left the Pride Center of Vermont a different person in a lot of ways. I learned a lot about myself and what I want to do. I made a lot of friends and really strong connections in
the LGBTQ+ community. I helped create a lot of fun, important events and I helped to organize a few that revolved around healing and recovery. I am a stronger, better advocate after working at PCVT, and I am so thankful for the opportunity to have spent time there.