Summer 2013 at
National Advocates for Pregnant Women

Working at National Advocates for Pregnant Women (NAPW) this past summer proved to be a deeply transformative experience that complicated my attitudes towards powerful sociopolitical institutions while simultaneously allowing me to develop tools to organize and strategize around a truly intersectional message. Small, diverse, and ideologically-charged, NAPW works to secure the civil and human rights of pregnant women through legal advocacy, grassroots organizing, and public education. Our executive director, Lynn Paltrow, founded NAPW after winning a landmark Supreme Court case (*Ferguson v. City of Charleston*) that ruled mandatory drug testing of pregnant women in South Carolina hospitals was unconstitutional. Much of NAPW's litigation is thus devoted to protecting pregnant women who use drugs from being prosecuted for a range of felony offenses, including child abuse and neglect. This philosophy privileges treatment over punishment, and seeks to keep women and their families together in the face of intense scrutiny in low income minority neighborhoods by institutions involved in law enforcement, child services, and health care.

I was initially presented with the challenge of reconciling my ideological stance against the prosecution of people who use drugs while incorporating a realistic framework that accounted for the rights and well-being of newborns. I soon came to believe that this false dichotomy between the rights of pregnant women and child welfare was informed by a deeply engrained cultural attitude that promotes social control over pregnancy as a mechanism to strip away the rights of women who happen to be pregnant. While most of my weeks at my internship were full of discussions and outings, I spent a considerable amount of time reading and defining a personal epistemology towards systemic institutional oppression that relied on firsthand accounts of marginalized women and their social realities in conjunction with a fledgling legal interpretation that granted women full autonomy over their bodies, without exception.
NAPW's commitment to education is made physically apparent as soon as one enters the small, midtown office. On top of several bookshelves and display tables are articles and law reviews that document some of NAPW's recent efforts, and provide visitors with a diverse set of perspectives about impacts of the criminalization of pregnancy. However, I was truly impacted by some of the literature that I stumbled upon, which seemed to exist outside of the insular mainstream class privileged production of knowledge that relies on qualifications and academic validation, and to which I was very accustomed by this point. *Rise* magazine opened my perspective to the importance of diversity in knowledge production, by incorporating firsthand accounts of those who are directly involved with the child welfare system with the intent of debunking harmful stereotypes of families affected by such interventions. The *Rise* staff hosts workshops around the five boroughs and some correctional facilities, including Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Each magazine is organized by theme, and many are devoted to practical matters such as finding a lawyer and preventing termination of parental rights (TPR) when incarcerated. The pieces I enjoyed the most, however, were the narratives about parents being separated from their children due to treatment, incarceration, or state ordered foster care. These stories were heartbreaking, but they opened my eyes to the importance of primary sources in forming nuanced, anti-essentialist interpretations to “explain” social problems.

NAPW's dedication to education went beyond such literal examples of knowledge dissemination, however. The staff truly embodied a non-hierarchical, open-minded, activist philosophy by encouraging reflective discussions and the development of individual interests. On the first day, the interns were told and encouraged to read anything we wanted, which felt liberating and validating to that end. We were often invited to listen in on conference calls our attorneys had with regional affiliates. Above all, I felt lucky that NAPW valued the importance of educational experiences outside of the office. The interns attended a brown bag lunch series at The Innocence Project, in which senior attorneys and medical professionals gave presentations on topics ranging from healthcare in prison, to
New York City’s “stop-question-and-frisk” program. I was able to see two of my academic idols give talks on our outings. They were prison reform expert Marc Mauer with The Sentencing Project and neuroscientist Dr. Carl Hart whose research about drug addiction at Columbia University has helped debunk many stereotypes about drug use and abuse.

I also attended two all-day conferences while I was interning at NAPW this summer. The first was ACLU’s Law Student's for Reproductive Justice meeting. I felt incredibly privileged to be able to attend, because it felt like I was getting a glimpse into a potential future path of mine. The conference helped me start conceiving of a possible career in public interest law, yet I did feel that there was something to be desired substantively. It seemed as though the ACLU’s sole focus on abortion rights devolved into a political states' rights chess match, removed of the day-to-day effects of institutionalized racism and classism that paint a broader picture about the concerning lack of social welfare in the United States. When we returned to NAPW to debrief, I shared my critique of the conference and was met with validation and agreement, followed by a healthy discussion. We discussed the importance of raising your voice in dissent. Memorably, several people broke down in tears when someone brought up a relevant section of the seventh book of *Harry Potter*, when Neville stood up for what he believed in a class, and he told Harry it was because he had inspired him to do so. This conversation, which took place pretty early on in the summer, left me feeling as though my ideals and perspectives could someday influence change or gain legitimacy. Looking back, however, I feel that it is important to acknowledge the realities of political maneuvering and the paradox of the socially impactful and ideologically pure non-profit. NAPW enacts its intersectional philosophy in a powerful way, but its small size creates a natural limit to the number of cases it can take each year, in comparison to an organization like ACLU or Center for Reproductive Rights, that must take on every single challenge to the protections established by *Roe v. Wade*.

The other full day conference we attended was actually a training session in identifying and
reducing stigma associated with drug use, hosted by the Harm Reduction Coalition. This training session was fascinating, mostly because of the diverse group of attendees, which included social workers for Administration of Children's Services, addiction/treatment counselors, and hospital personnel. There were a couple of women in attendance at that training session, however, who had each lost their son to drug overdose, and told the group that they hoped to learn how reducing drug related stigma can help families seek treatment earlier and have honest discussions about drug use. Once again, the incorporation of firsthand experiences helped broaden my perspective and question assumptions I previously held. These two all day events were particularly memorable parts of my summer, even though I feel like they highlighted two distinct ideological approaches to reproductive justice work. One creates slow but quantifiable institutional change, while the other is concerned with the immediate condition of specific communities as well as activism. I have not yet resolved how to reconcile these seemingly divergent tracks, but I was able to explore them further by embedding my consciousness about the global-local implications of social change work into my assignments at NAPW.

I had two major long-term assignments this summer, as well as a group project at the end and guided research tasks every now and then. The mix provided me with flexibility in terms of evolution of ideas over multiple revisions. Since my work was more based in outreach and education, I enjoyed discussing the legal interns' projects with them, and tried to wrap my head around the complexities and the bizarre and ingenious aspects of the law. It was during these interactions that I feel I gained invaluable advice about the experience of law school, which further helped me envision a future in that world. My first assignment involved an idea Lynn had for an NAPW award series, for courageous activists. I was to research and design a description for such an award to be presented to Claudette Colvin, the 15-year old girl who resisted busing segregation nine months before Rosa Parks did, but was not publicized by the NAACP due to her age, class, and the fact that she became pregnant shortly after her arrests. While doing my research for this award, I learned that Claudette Colvin was later one
of the five main plaintiffs in the Supreme Court case that ended busing segregation, and that she is a retired nurse who lives in the Bronx! Everyone was excited at the prospect of getting to meet Colvin, if she wanted to receive the award. I drafted a letter to Colvin and I know the staff has plans to implement the award eventually, however that was the extent of my work on it this summer.

My other major assignment was an informative flyer that exposes blatant misinformation used by Crisis Pregnancy Centers (CPCs) throughout the country, who are devoted to an anti-abortion philosophy, or in rare and extreme cases, for profit adoption schemes. CPCs commonly lie to women about how far along they are in their pregnancy to convince them they don't have enough time to get an abortion, even if the woman clearly does not want to carry the fetus to term. They are known for spreading anti-scientific knowledge, linking abortion to breast cancer and suicide, as well as manipulative shame tactics, like reading dismal statistics about children born to single mothers. I collaborated with my fellow undergraduate intern, Becca, for this CPC flyer which was helpful as we were able to bounce ideas back and forth and develop a shared ideology surrounding how we selected information. I heavily drew upon my experiences working at the Center for Women and Community as a rape crisis counselor for this assignment, particularly when we discussed how to prioritize resources and present them as non-political and diverse. Lynn and Jeanne Flavin, a member of our Board of Directors, edited multiple drafts of the flyer and we went through several generations before making the final edit on my last day. It is my intention to collaborate with our reproductive justice group at UMass, VOX, and distribute our CPC flyers at a clinic in Greenfield that deliberately targets college students who are in a vulnerable position.

The final task I dedicated significant time to this summer was contacting and organizing amici curiae for a case that NAPW filed for cert, to be tried in the New Jersey Supreme Court. The case involved a woman who had a history of opiate addiction and was enrolled in a state-sponsored methadone therapy program. Although the program accounted for a possible brief period of Neonatal
Abstinence Syndrome (NAS) for her newborn, the symptoms could easily be managed with little intervention. In addition, the defendant believed that the withdrawal would cause her to miscarry, and was advised to go on methadone treatment. The state of New Jersey charged her with child abuse and neglect, and removed custody of both of her children. After receiving news of a victory in New Jersey's appellate level court, we put together a list of expert professionals and organizations that could testify on behalf of the defendant. Although this work was not necessarily substantive, I enjoyed experiencing the process of appeals level court, and feeling like my efforts could bolster evidence for a case that would change New Jersey’s ability to mandate drug testing of pregnant women.

Ultimately my time at NAPW allowed me to reconceptualize the possibilities behind institutionalized forms of resistance, by privileging science over conjecture, actively engaging in the implications of our privilege, and simultaneously, relying on the narratives of women who have been marginalized, with an understanding that they are the expert of their own life in any situation. Although I am not sure what path I hope to pursue after graduating next year, my experience at NAPW last summer has allowed me envision myself in any role that mediates social significance with impactful research and action, and I am deeply thankful for having been given this opportunity.