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Sadie Nash Leadership Project Final Report

“It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains.”

This chant by Assata Shakur was not only a powerful melody heard throughout the Newark Sadie Nash Summer Institute, but also perfectly encapsulates the vision and goal of the organization itself. For nine weeks during the summer of 2016, I had the humbling privilege to work with the Sadie Nash Leadership Project. As a Dean, my official responsibilities included undergoing a three-week Dean training course, serving as a teaching assistant in an assigned academic course, leading weekly workshops and facilitating group discussions, and supporting both programmatic and administrative aspects of the organization. However, the official description of my role does not even begin to describe the magical connections I got to make with SI participants, or Nashers, the inspiring Deans sisters I made strong personal and professional relationships with, and the tremendous personal growth I felt every day on the job. By working with an organization whose core mission is to strengthen, empower, and equip young women as agents of change in their lives and the world, I found
that through helping my Nashers actualize this mission I, too, made leaps and bounds toward the same goal myself. Through the three-week Dean training, I explored the various intersections of my identity, including the social privileges and disadvantages I possess, learned the basics of youth work, and attended workshops regarding pertinent issues that come up when working with low income youth of color. During the Summer Institute, I served as a teaching assistant in the Leadership Seminar class and also designed and carried out weekly workshops on a variety of social issues pertaining to youth and women of color. This journey was tumultuous, to say the least. Every moment was not easy, and some were even extremely difficult, but I am very grateful to have had this opportunity and to have learned and grown so much.

Newark SI Nashers, Deans, and staff with Alicia Garza, co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The highlight of my internship occurred on a weekly basis during Dean Workshops. Dean Workshops were simultaneously the most challenging and the most rewarding projects of my internship. Dean workshops allow every Dean to carefully plan out an interactive, thoughtful workshop on a social justice or creative topic of their choosing. While this seems like a fairly simple task from the outside, in reality it is very trying! The first major difficulty I found was in
choosing a workshop topic. Being a sociology major has introduced me to and made me knowledgeable about a wide spectrum of social inequalities, social constructions, and interesting historical phenomena that I wish had known about when I was a high school student. And if I was able to overcome the obstacle of choosing a topic, the next great hurdle came in the form of choosing a means of presenting the subject matter in an appropriate and engaging way. No matter how exhilarating critical race theory and intersectionality is to me, lecturing my Nashers on it for 90 minutes straight was going to bore them to sleep. Incorporating games, visual media, and thought-provoking discussion questions became the cornerstone of a good workshop. When I was finally able to dream up a topic and format, amassing all of the requisite materials and print-outs was my final challenge. Working on a non-profit budget taught me to creatively improvise everything I could possibly need for a workshop and make light of unideal situations.

My most successful and personally transformative workshop came during Week 5 of the Summer Institute – “Burkas, Bombers, and Bill O’Reilly.” From the onset of my experience with SNLP, I knew that I was going to really delve into what it means to be a Muslim-American woman of color. Because my Muslim identity is the first thing that most people see when they meet me, I often grapple with microaggressions centered on anti-Muslim fear that has become widespread and normalized in American society. Prior to my experience with Sadie Nash I was apprehensive about exploring this very important identity of mine in a non-Muslim setting, simply out of fear of being misunderstood. However, after engaging in deep and vulnerable conversations with my Nashers, Dean sisters, and staff about womanhood and identity, I knew that the closing of the Summer Institute would be the perfect time to reveal the most vulnerable part of myself and speak about the implications of Islamophobia on an actual Muslim.
My Islamophobia workshop was well-received. After screening an excerpt from a documentary about Islamophobia, the participants of my workshop were invited to write down words and phrases that came to their mind when they saw the word “Muslim”. Ranging from “misunderstood” and “terrorist” to “family,” the responses exhibited a marked disparity in how Islam was viewed among the Nashers. Next, I delivered a lesson about media bias against marginalized communities by three screening clips from the politically conservative “Bill O’Reilly Show” that displayed ageism, racism, and Islamophobia, respectively. This screening began a conversation about how Islamophobia directly connects to other forms of bigotry through the biased media prism. The Nashers began to open up about how most of the information they had about Islam and Muslims came from news channels, but it was these very news channels that demonized their own communities as well. Together, we were able to conclude that fighting the hatred and unfounded fear of Muslims should be part and parcel of all social justice movements that strive for social equity.

Since the beginning of the Summer Institute, the Community Safe Space guidelines had been repetitively reinforced to the Nashers. From this SI bedrock concept came an especially critical guideline: speak your truth. As women of color in a communities that have been subject to environmental racism, underfunded public schools, food injustice, and many forms of systemic racism, Nashers are rarely given a platform to openly speak about and reflect on how oppression manifests itself in their lives. However, SNLP also believes in lived experience as a primary source of knowledge and power. Through Dean Groups, Leadership Seminar, and Dean Workshops, I was given multiple opportunities on a daily basis to hear Nashers speak their truths, unlearn my biases, and work with them to unlearn theirs. Coming from a highly academic environment, I’ve noticed that sociology learned in the classroom tends to look
unsympathetically at populations and people. However, hearing the Nashers’ lived experiences and applying them to my understanding of the way that systemic oppression works truly elevated my own learning as a sociology student. It was humbling to see how some of my Nashers were able to differentiate “lead water” from water that was fit for consumption or their reflections on the psychological effects of having incarcerated family members and friends. Concepts like environmental racism and mass incarceration, while captivating in an academic sociology environment, are entirely different and eye-opening when discussed with young women who experience them on a daily basis. Coming from an economically privileged background has allowed me to avoid many of these harsh social realities, but working and sharing space with Nashers has reignited my drive to work toward changing these social inequalities and ensuring that future generations of young women have unfettered rights to self-determination and equality.

While I genuinely believe that SNLP went above and beyond to provide support and training to all Deans throughout SI, there is always room for improvement. For any future or prospective Deans, just know that if you want to work with young women of color, you should expect to come face to face with trauma. Because women of color are marginalized and are rarely given a chance to openly and safely speak about it, the SI environment can unearth very traumatic memories, experiences, and overwhelming emotions. During my SI experience, Nashers approached me about intimate partner violence and unhealthy relationships, drug abuse, immigration issues, and poverty. Being a college student who was only a few years older than these women, I felt unprepared to adequately address these issues myself and did not want to push a Nasher away by immediately referring them to our onsite social worker out of fear that they would never feel secure enough again to seek help. Facing the trauma of another, especially
when she has become like a younger sister to you is itself traumatic. And this heavily emotional aspect is inherent to youth work. One must be prepared and welcoming of these realities when engaging in such work. I felt that more time during Dean training should have been allotted to giving Deans a crash course on dealing with trauma in young women and preparing us and priming us with realistic scenarios of the types of issues that would come up during SI.

As parting words, I urge all future Deans to approach their SNLP experience with an open mind and a mental notebook and pen ready to document many new things. It is important to set goals for personal growth, but it is equally important to give things a chance before creating rigidified expectations. No amount of training can truly prepare you for young women speaking their truths, being completely honest, and sharing their dreams about what an ideal tomorrow looks like for them. The way that young people interact with words like “feminism,” “sexism,” and “racism” are very different from that way that you might. Furthermore, you should know that these Nashers will stretch you and push you and make you learn things about yourself that you had never so much as pondered before. They are dynamic and curious and energetic, and they will develop a valuable mentor-mentee relationship with you that requires you to be as vulnerable with them as you want them to be to you. In discussing issues like feminism, it takes a degree of humility on a Nasher’s part to say, “Yes, I had such and

Second-year Nashers organized a die-in on Rutgers University- Newark campus as a part of their capstone project to raise awareness about police brutality against women of color.
such idea of another girl because she acted in such and such way, but now that I’ve learned about feminism, I know that such and such way of thinking is not okay.” In the same way, you will also reach many points where you are humbled by the sheer intelligence and potential you are surrounded with, and you will be grateful that you can call these women your sisters in the struggle.