Reproductive Rights Activist Service Corps (RRASC) Intern Final Report

VICTORIA KENT
University of Massachusetts Amherst

The Prison Birth Project
http://www.theprisonbirthproject.org/
Amherst, MA

At the beginning of June I found myself abruptly thrown into my role as intern at the Prison Birth Project. Everything was moving at an incredible pace. Suddenly, I was meeting and working with new people, and had new responsibilities. At first, I was overwhelmed. But, the staff at PBP was super friendly and inviting and quickly set me at ease.

Throughout the summer I worked on a myriad of different things, from office tasks to event planning to fundraising. Because PBP only has a paid staff of 3, my role was to fill in wherever I was needed, so I working on different projects and operational tasks everyday. The large projects that I worked on were beginning researching other organizations and resources in western Massachusetts for a resource and referrals guide for previously incarcerated people. This project was extremely invigorating because it plugged me into all of the wonderful resources and organizations that the pioneer valley has to offer. I found out about farms like Nuestras Raices in Holyoke that is collectively run and offers educational opportunities to immigrant communities. I also realized that though there are many organizations in the area offering affordable services like health care, they still can be hard to access without transportation. Something that really stuck with me from our RRASC training in the spring, was that even though there may be a health clinic, it still can be no use to the communities that need it because of lack of transportation or other logistical challenges. When offering community resources and when planning communities we must think about the entire picture!

I also worked on researching Orange is the New Black and organizing an event in the fall for the greater community on the pros and cons of the tv series. The common read for the incoming class at UMASS is Orange is the New Black, which I think is good in a way, but also bad, because without a critical analysis OITNB perpetuates a lot of racial stereotypes and misconceptions about women’s prisons. Marisa, one of the co-managers and I will continue to organize this event/panel in the fall when she returns.
from maternity leave. A lot of the projects I worked with are ongoing, and I am excited to continue with them as a volunteer throughout the school year!

Near the end of my internship I began working with the fundraising committee, a group of volunteers planning for the annual Solidarity Supper in October. Doing this I could see more immediate results of my work, which included sending emails to groups of sponsors and businesses asking for donations. This was also rewarding because I learned how to use an email generating software that adds images and fancy formatting. This was one of the most satisfying projects because the emails looked professional and we got positive responses! Fundraising, though interesting was also challenging for me because I had no experience asking for money and it felt awkward to me.

PBP is an organization that works remotely through file sharing and email, so the skills I used most often in my internship were communication and organization. Communication was a really important skill because I needed to keep the staff updated on my progress with each task and project. It is really important for all members of the organization to be on the same page with each project and task. Organization was also very important because I was usually working on more than one task or project at the same time. I would usually meet with a staff member at the beginning of the week, get oriented with my work for the week, and sometimes would not meet face to face with a staff member until the next week.

I found it hard to prioritize and stay on track with my work when I didn’t need to be in the office everyday. Working from home or a coffee shop was a wonderful experience but does take a level of concentration and responsibility that I was not accustomed to. I found myself a couple times leaving a whole week’s worth of work for one day. As the summer went on, I grew from this challenge and realized that the hardest part was just getting started. I created a space in my house conducive to work, which felt more office-like and wrote myself out a schedule. Self-motivation was difficult at times, but I would say my main difficulty this summer was lack of confidence. Because I was new to both non-profit work and to internships, I was scared and extremely self-conscious. PBP is an organization that has definitive structure, and the staff and Leadership Circle (LC) know their roles and tasks extremely well, which can be intimidating to a wide-eyed intern. PBP works at top speed, which was evident through taking notes at the staff and LC meetings. All the members work so cohesively together it was challenging to jump in as someone new.

As the summer went on and I got into a groove and began to meet some of the volunteers I began to feel more like I had a place at PBP. Near the end of the summer we had an appreciation potluck where I got to socialize with volunteers, staff and LC in a non-work environment, which made me feel more a part of the organization as well. These feelings and fears I had were largely internalized and due to unwarranted self doubts. My lack of confidence in myself was most aware when I was making phone calls to local businesses asking for sponsorship for the Solidarity Supper. I felt so stupid on the phone, and like I didn’t know what I was talking about, but the staff of PBP constantly reminded me that I did know what I was talking about.
The highlight of my internship this summer was definitely working with the PBP staff, they are all such wonderful women and they really inspired me. I loved getting to know them and I really enjoyed being a person that could help out with whatever they needed. Getting an up close look at how collective organizations are run was an extremely rewarding experience. This summer I got to see how nonprofit work and how reproductive justice and social justice work is done. Because of the relationships between the staff members and the LC members, I got a really intimate look at the Prison Birth Project. I saw all the daily workings, all the long term projects and plans, all the triumphs, such as getting the Women’s Fund grant, and all the setbacks like being hassled by the prison staff.

I also learned a lot more about reproductive justice. I had an understanding of reproductive justice framework from past coursework, but working around reproductive justice gave me a much greater understanding. Reproductive justice is not simply the right to birth control or abortion rights but is more generally allows all people of all genders to make their own educated decisions regarding reproduction. Where they want to have children, have children, but insuring that everyone has the right to make their own choice. Prisons are sexually violent not only in their physical practices like strip searches and lack of personal privacy, but also because they keep people away from being able to maintain family bonds, have children or to not have children. Incarcerated people are stripped from their ability to make choices about their own bodies. Reproductive justice and social justice are not two separate types of justice, but are intricately intertwined. One cannot exist without the other. Without reproductive justice there can be no social justice.

In STPEC we have been talking a lot about theory versus practice, and my time at PBP this summer really showed me what practice looks like. Nonprofit work is the melding of theory and practice, it joins real life with abstract social theory. PBP is doing real work with real people who are incarcerated. Incarcerated people and incarcerated pregnant people are not simply statistics but people who live and feel and whose lives and families are affected by the carceral system forever. Marisa, who was my main contact person for the majority of the summer, was pregnant and had her baby right around the end of my 10 week intern at PBP this summer. The carceral system affects people of all ages, colors and genders but to different degrees based on societal oppressions. The carceral system is a tool used to keep oppressed people, under the boot of ideals like white supremacy. It is not simply an issue of race, gender but of the intersections of these identities.

I haven’t really planned my future, but my internship this summer gave me hope that I can go into non-profit work and that I can make a difference in society while not starving. Throughout my life I’ve heard people talk about “practical” or “useful” degrees and I always rolled my eyes because every degree is useful, it just depends on how it is used. But there was always that little voice in the back of my head that told me that I would never have money and that I would never be able to do what I actually care about (social justice work) as a profession. Lisa and Marianne started the Prison Birth Project in 2008 from scratch and today they are running programs in the Women’s Correctional...
Center in Chicopee, hosting events and trainings as well as forming coalitions with other reproductive justice organizations in Massachusetts!

My time at PBP was awesome and I wouldn't choose another organization if I could. PBP is wonderful and they are doing meaningful work and giving attention to an issue that is largely swept under the rug. My only advice to future interns is to be confident in yourself, because you know your stuff! You are an intelligent, resourceful individual and CAN make a difference in your community and together we can make societal change!

More information on the RRASC internship program: clpp.hampshire.edu/RRASC