This summer, I interned at the Native American Women’s Health Education Resource Center (NAWHERC) in Lake Andes, South Dakota. Over the course of ten weeks, I worked on a variety of projects and tasks, none of which I could have ever predicted. Before I arrived in Lake Andes, I had the idea that my internship would be structured and very academic, but I quickly realized that my experience would be very different. Because NAWHERC is a grassroots non-profit in a small town on a Native reservation, the work I did there differed from the big city organizing I am used to. Monday through Friday from nine to five I worked in the Resource Center, where I would do a variety of things such as write articles for the Indigenous Women’s Reproductive Watch Newsletter, put together food pantry bags for locals, take minutes for board meetings, staff the front desk, and help with special projects. Some days I was around the office, helping wherever I was needed, but other days I got to go on special outings with my coworkers.

One day I got to cover the Marty Indian School and Ihanktonwan Community College graduations with the KDKO radio station. On another day, I went on a huge shopping trip to prepare for the Dakota Language Immersion School Summer Program. While my daily tasks always varied, my biggest project was being an assistant to the teacher in the Dakota Language Immersion School Program. This was my favorite part of the whole summer! Youth from the community came to the Resource Center for four weeks of language immersion. Every day, I got to be with the youth, play games with them, and help them with crafts. We went on field trips to see wild buffalo and to pick sage. I made so many remarkable connections with the youth and the adults in the classroom — I’ll never forget these special bonds. That summer, we taught cultural preservation and the Dakota language to twenty youth from the community.
Another large project I worked on was implementing a “Break the Silence” campaign with my fellow interns. The goal of “Break the Silence” was to encourage Native communities to talk about sexual assault and violence. We created a placard for people to put up in their windows, signifying that their home was a safe space for youth who may be fleeing an unsafe situation at home. We also designed “Break the Silence” sashes, which we took to the Fort Randall Casino Powwow for dancers to wear over their regalia. We even ordered bumper stickers! It was awesome to see a project materialize in that way, and it seemed to be well received by the community. On a personal note, I felt so incredibly privileged and honored to had been invited to the Powwow.

I was also responsible for putting together a table at the Indian Health Services (IHS) Children’s Health Fair, which was equipped with educational activities for youth about healthy relationships. We gave out balloons, door prizes, and even coloring sheets that said, “These Hands Are Not for Hitting.” Towards the end of my internship, I assisted on a Facebook marketing campaign to encourage people to vote in the 2018 elections. I was also responsible for marketing t-shirts that were sold through the center, as well as coming up with catchy messages to reach a wide audience.

When I wasn’t working at the Resource Center, I helped staff the local domestic violence shelter in exchange for rent. I was essentially on call three to four days a week, and during those times I was responsible for answering the phones, facilitating resident intake and management, and more broadly ensuring that everything was going smoothly and everyone was safe. Because I had previous experience working in a domestic violence shelter, I felt comfortable helping at the Lake Andes shelter, but it was completely different than what I was used to. Instead of having one specific job or role, I did whatever was necessary to keep the shelter functioning.
Sometimes this meant organizing pickups with local law enforcement and residents. Sometimes it meant babysitting residents’ children while they went on job interviews. Sometimes it meant going to the grocery store. Other days, I had in-depth conversations with the residents about what they had been through. These moments were incredibly moving and special, but also very emotionally exhausting. I had to learn how to take care of myself and not take on everyone else’s emotions.

Many of the tasks and projects I worked on required me to be flexible, understanding, and willing to work with a team. I did a lot of community outreach and interpersonal counseling, so it was important that I was always empathetic and patient. I had to have excellent verbal communication skills, and had to be able to go with the flow and multitask.

While my internship was wonderful and overall a positive experience, I did face some difficulties throughout the course of the summer. On days when I was writing articles, I found it hard to sit at a desk for eight hours straight. I dealt with this by reaching out to my friends, who sent me some helpful meditations and tips to stay focused. Some days, I also felt like articles weren’t my strong suit. I didn’t feel that I was a good writer, and in addition it was hard for me to write for an Indigenous audience when I am not an Indigenous person. I am white, and I wanted to be conscious and intentional about what I was writing to avoid being colonizing. I dealt with confronting my white privilege (and various other privileges) by having conversations with my coworkers, supervisor, and other interns about race, class, gender, and sexuality. At first, these conversations were difficult because I didn’t want to mess up, but as time went on, they became a normal and natural part of life at the office. I felt comfortable having these conversations and they helped me learn to decenter myself and my whiteness, and do work that was benefiting the Ihanktonwan Community.
I also got very homesick about halfway through my internship. I had the money to buy a plane ticket home, but I knew I would have to take off work to do so. I simply talked to my supervisor about it, and she was incredible and understanding and gave me the time off that I needed.

Living in one room with many other interns was also difficult. Sometimes I found it hard to have any time to myself. But after I had been in Lake Andes for a while, I learned the best places to hike and jog. I began writing incredible poetry out by the lake. I started painting with watercolors and handwriting letters to old friends. I did what felt good for my body, and I truly believe that the experience was so restorative and refreshing for my mental, physical, emotional, and social health. I discovered so many new things about myself, and in many ways fell in love with myself all over again — both through the work I was doing, and the reflections I was having on that work.

As a Women’s and Gender Studies major and a Social Change minor, I felt very prepared for my internship. As someone who has studied Critical Race Theory, Black Queer Theory, Queer Indigenous Theory, and other theories of decolonization, I felt confident that I knew all there was to know. But I didn’t. Part of my internship was understanding that academic knowledge is not the only knowledge there is. I learned a lot about the academic privilege I have, which allows me to sit in classrooms and theorize about communities that I am not a part of, while never having to witness or experience the oppression they face. I learned that I needed to practice humility, and challenge what I considered knowledge, as I entered this space as a white woman.

This internship taught me so much about being a community leader, a team player, and a selfless and compassionate worker. It taught me how to do solidarity work. It taught me how to
organize with, and never for, a community I am not a part of. Being at NAWHERC challenged me to examine aspects of my privilege I had never even considered, and I am forever grateful for all the lessons I learned and the beautiful people I got to meet. In the future, I would like to return to NAWHERC and stay for a longer period of time — that is how special I felt the work I did there was. This internship helped me understand that I don’t need to have a clear-cut path to success, and that success is subjective. To me, success is helping others and building meaningful connections that in the end create sustainable relationships. As long as I am always creating and maintaining sustainable, healthy, and impactful relationships with people and communities, I will consider myself successful no matter where I end up.

I absolutely loved NAWHERC. The organization does such incredible work. They do everything you could imagine, from reproductive rights to environmental justice to policy work, and they really challenged me to think deeper about the connections between reproductive justice and social justice. I am forever grateful for this opportunity, and highly recommend any future interns who are willing to work hard to apply to NAWHERC. Being far away from home in a small town doing emotional exhausting work is difficult, but it is important, and it is valued by the people at NAWHERC. And you will always know you are valued and appreciated.

Even though internships are designed to teach you something that will benefit you in your career, I think it’s important to be open to the possibility that you may not learn what you expect to learn. I encourage anyone who applies here to really think about what kind of work they want to do, and what they want to learn. Being dedicated to reproductive justice and social justice is a necessity for interning here.