My family absolutely loves films and television. Before he got into the cigar business, my dad used to work in the film industry as a screenwriter when we lived in Los Angeles. One time, we were all watching “Fringe” and my dad suddenly paused the show and yelled “Hey! That guy owes me money!” at one of the actors. Growing up, I watched television incessantly. My favorite shows were “Sabrina the Teenage Witch” (both the animated and the live-action one), “The Winx Club” and “W.I.T.C.H.”, all about girls working together to rid the world of evil. They were my role models.

However, the representation of women in film and television hasn’t gotten better in the fifteen years since I woke up early on Sunday mornings to watch Sabrina mess up spells—perhaps it’s gotten worse. Increasingly, there are fewer and fewer avenues for women to be represented on screen. In order to be strong, she must be a femme fatale; to be vulnerable, she must have a traumatic past. Women have become stereotypes of people with clichéd roles and experiences rather than being fleshed-out and thoughtful characters. Disparities exist behind the screen as well: only 16% of producers, writers and directors are female. How can accurate representations of women be portrayed if there is no one behind the creative force to ensure it? My interest and love of the screen and awareness of the gender disparities in it has inspired me to pursue an internship with the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media through the Sorensen Fellowship.

Last summer, my sister and I huddled next to each other by the kitchen table and watched the first episode of “Orange is the New Black”. After watching five episodes straight, two things became obvious. First, we couldn’t move our legs because they had fallen asleep hours ago.
Second, that this show was revolutionary. These women were fresh, diverse, and incredibly real. For the first time, I saw myself on screen. It was a exhilarating but horribly crystallizing moment because this was the first time that I’ve ever felt this way. Gabourey Sidibe, Academy Award nominee, said that “the way I watch movies, I’m really searching for myself, because I don’t get to see enough of myself and I don’t get to like myself enough. But if I get to see myself on screen, then I know that I exist.” When it came to “Orange is the New Black”, I was able to see most of the identities I value most treated with care on screen and I finally felt valid in the eyes of the media.

In 2010, I got involved in a high school club called SHAPE (Students Helping Achieve Philanthropic Excellence). As head of the Advocacy Committee within the club, I went to my city’s town hall meeting and spoke about the lack of handicap-accessible means in the parks. Three weeks later, several handicap-accessible chairs and lifts were installed. Watching my younger brother, who can’t walk or talk, for whom my work was dedicated, finally get to go on the swings sparked my passion for activism.

As I’ve gotten older and read more regarding gender inequality, my activism has shifted to that of women’s rights. During my first month at Brandeis, I joined the Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance (FMLA) and worked my way up to the Publicity Chair on the executive board. In room 324 of the Shapiro Campus Center, I’ve led discussions surrounding representations women in television and film. Analyzing the sexism abundant in Hollywood with twenty intelligent feminists drives me to fight for change. The process of writing questions, researching relevant information and facilitating discussions has prepared me to organize on a larger scale.
Even though the experience with SHAPE set the foundations for my activism and gave me the basic tools to move forward, the ease by which change was accomplished was not indicative of future work. I’ve moved from individual mobilization to larger organizational work, such as with FMLA and Brandeis Students Against Sexual Violence (BSASV), changing the goals from small local projects to institutional ones. On the Brandeis campus, conversations about changing school policies with the administration have stretched on for semesters. The shift from immediate results to prolonged struggles has been a difficult adjustment due to the level of bureaucracy involved. However, the power behind institutional changes and their long term effects pushes me to be involved.

In 2007, Geena Davis founded the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media to work with the entertainment industry to increase and better the female presence in media in a male-dominated industry. The Institute accomplishes this by working within the industry to “engage, educate and influence” both the public and the entertainment business itself about the extreme disparities and stereotypes found with female characters. An internship with them would consist of being assigned to a specific project regarding educating the public about the dismal state of women in the media. As a double major in Women’s Studies and Film, I have come to understand that the best way to affect societal change is through education of the people. The institute’s dual approach is the perfect blend of activism through education by working to educate at a social level through consumers of media and at an institutional level through industry giants themselves.

Through my involvement in multiple activist groups, I have found that conversation works extremely well to make people aware of certain issues, provide a space for them to ask any questions and make a broad topic personal. Ideally, I would enjoy using the research the
institute would assign to create and maintain workshops in the Los Angeles area regarding the current disparities of women in the film industry and how it got to that state. These forums would provide statistical information and a space to ask questions that people might not have felt comfortable or able to access previously. I hope to use these workshops as a starting point to spark a broader conversation about women in media and how to write women in a different story.

Currently, I am waiting on a response from another potential internship site, PowerUp Films. This organization’s mission is to promote the visibility of LGBT women in entertainment, arts and all forms of media through financing, developing and distributing films in addition to conducting educational programs for filmmakers themselves. My identity as a bisexual woman has fostered a personal stake in changing the horrible representations and complete erasure of bisexuality in television and film. Even though “Orange is the New Black” highlighted so many women of color and different sexualities, the word “bisexual” was never said, even when women described themselves by the definition of bisexuality. Working with this organization would ideally consist of creating a similar workshop program that for the Geena Davis Institute with a specific focus on the representations of LGBT women in the media and the broader societal influences that fostered such a negative environment.

The courses I have taken at Brandeis have given me a solid foundation in film and gender and have set a foundation upon which I can engage intellectually in the work the fellowship would allow me to pursue. Courses such as Women, Gender, and Sexualities have made me aware of how to take any topic, such as advertising or language, and observe it through an intersectional lens and multiple perspectives. This method of analyzing information has challenged and prepared me to think about the multiple pressures on women that would prevent
them from pursuing film as a career or hinder them once in the field. To prepare for the internship, I plan on taking Television and American Culture next semester. So far, my studies have focused primarily on the film industry as a whole. This course would provide a history of television and it’s impact on American society. This information will be an excellent base for my planned workshops by giving it a specific focus on television as a medium. I’ve been involved in two theater productions, acting in the Vagina Monologues last spring and assistant stage managing Spring Awakening this fall. Being on both sides of productions led by incredibly talented women have proved the importance and vitality that diversity brings to entertainment. Through my studies and activities outside of the classroom, my passion for better representation of women in entertainment have been bolstered by experiences and academics.

Television has a greater affect on culture and people than it is given credit. Studying film with a gendered lens has widened my eyes to the lack of women behind the screen. The intersection of my majors, creative writing minor and love for television have led me to want to work within the television industry, but with a feminist twist. As a television writer with a particular focus on gender relations, I would work to make the writers room portray women in accurate and complex ways. Having more positive and intricate female characters to view on screen would give six-year old me and millions of other children more options than just brave witches to identify with. The characters I saw on screen growing up made me a woman who constantly supports and values other women, even as society tries to drag us into cat fights over boys’ attention. As a Sorensen Fellow, I would be able to work on making more positive female characters for women to look up to through the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. Maybe in the future, I’ll be watching television with my family and cry out “Hey! That actress owes me money!”