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Summer 2009

Restarting Lives: A Summer Experience at a Domestic Violence Shelter

Domestic violence is a “pattern of behaviors that one person uses to gain and maintain power and control over another in a relationship”. This definition describes an abusive relationship in which one person controls the other by fear. For the summer, I decided to learn more about this issue by interning at Transition House in Boston, which is a small non-profit organization that focuses on preventing domestic violence through community outreach, education, and intervention,⁰ as well as working towards empowering the survivors and the greater community. This internship gave me the opportunity to learn about and even join the movement against domestic violence.

I spent a few months researching internships and nonprofit organizations before deciding to intern at Transition House. I was originally interested in working with a women’s non-profit organization that would allow me to combine social work and event planning with direct services. In the beginning, I searched online for posted internship opportunities on idealist.org. Once I realized that I wanted to create my own internship, I consulted the site Bostonresource.net for a list of Boston non-profit women’s organizations and the online Brandeis Women’s and Gender Studies Program for their “opportunities and resources” page. Through my research, I realized that I wanted to work at a domestic violence shelter, because the small organization would allow me to explore several potential careers. After figuring out which issue I was most interested in, I consulted the WGS internship coordinator Deidre Hunter to get her insider’s opinion of the Boston area domestic violence shelters. Finally, after having visited two shelters and met the employees, I decided that Transition House would be best organization to work with.

As the only summer intern at this organization, I had a variety of responsibilities at both the emergency shelter and the main office. At the shelter, I was available for the women to listen to their problems or concerns and help with childcare. By shadowing the advocates, I observed how they support the women and familiarized myself with the forms and associated organizations. In addition, I was responsible for making the shelter friendlier. As a shared living environment, it was difficult for the women to maintain good relationships with each other; therefore, I reminded the women to stay focused on their personal goals. My work at the main office, development research and planning a

summer event, was slower paced and more office-like than the shelter's, because the main office staff had more time to respond to questions than the shelter advocates who had constant contact with the women.

While I was involved in many projects ranging from investigative journalism to event planning, I predominantly worked on four. My first project was to help the women obtain MBTA Disability T-Passes by researching and then giving a presentation on how to fill out the forms and what their health care providers must sign. For my next project, I was assigned to write the organization's first newsletter. Deciding to create a guided "virtual tour" of the emergency shelter from my perspective as the summer intern, I interviewed several employees and shelter residents to hear their opinions of the shelter. Inciting interesting conversations, this was the perfect way to introduce me to the Transition House community. I helped the shelter become more "green" for my third project. In order to reintroduce the recycling system, I created simple English and Spanish instructions and helped make a recycling presentation. For my fourth project, I organized an internationally themed potluck dinner for the shelter residents, staff and board members. I really enjoyed talking with the women about their family recipes and coordinating an event that brought the community together.

In addition to these projects, I also organized all the donations and created a donor database as well as a Boston food pantry list. By working on a variety of projects, I experienced different aspects of the non profit world and the immediate day-to-day concerns of the emergency shelter.

Since I created the internship, my goals included working in event planning, direct services and development. At the emergency shelter, I wanted to plan an event for the women and another for their children, manage the hotline and learn more about mental health issues and how domestic violence affects its survivors. In contrast, at the main office I had hoped to better understand day-to-day office life and co-coordinate a fundraiser or community outreach event. Although I have worked hard this summer to accomplish these goals, there are two that I did not meet. I was trained to answer hotline calls through the 45-hour training session, but I did not answer them at the shelter. The second goal I did not accomplish was to help coordinate an event in the community, because Transition House had just organized a successful fundraiser in May and did not yet have plans for another. Even though I did not meet two of my goals, I still learned a lot from the experience.

In addition to accomplishing most of my initial goals, I also gained a few unanticipated goals and skills from working at the emergency shelter. Through my observations, I discovered that some of

the women did not know how to be positive parental role models. I therefore become determined to foster loving relationships between the mothers and their children. I also acquired new skills at the shelter such as managing young children and getting the women to state their conclusions without me first revealing them. These new skills have greatly helped me talk with the survivors and be less afraid of working with young children.

This internship at Transition House was very flexible, which allowed me to explore multiple careers in one setting. After working at the shelter for two months, I have decided to shift my career path to focus on psychology and mental health issues instead of social work. I am fascinated with analyzing people's behaviors and therefore want to further pursue psychology instead of social work. I have also realized that I enjoy planning events on a more professional level. Even though I will not become a shelter advocate, I have gained several skills and been introduced to other careers.

After going through a long search for this internship, I have a few recommendations for other students interested in pursuing a summer internship. First of all, take the time needed to thoroughly think about your interests and what you want to do for the summer. If you are interested in non-profit organizations, many of them post their internships later in the semester, which will allow you time to fully research your options. Approach a department's internship advisor, even if you are not majoring in that department, and your professors for advice and suggestions. Once the internship begins, always ask questions. The supervisor and employees will be glad to see your interest and teach you information. It will also be interesting to ask their opinions of the field. In addition, I would advise students to arrange regular meetings with their supervisors to assess the work and ensure their goals are being met. In the end, make sure to enjoy the internship; as an intern, you are there not only to learn but to also enjoy the learning process.

My summer internship at Transition House taught me a lot about the non-profit world. More specifically, I learned about domestic violence as an issue as well as the people affected by it and those working to prevent it by first learning in a classroom setting and then applying my knowledge at the shelter. Inserted into a world full of economic and educational restraints, it was interesting to observe how these affect the chance of a relationship becoming abusive. After this internship, I have greater respect for the survivors of domestic violence, for I understand that things are not as easy as they seem; you must work for what you have.