Deconstructing Assumptions: A Journey of Discovery and Growth

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The night before my first day as an intern at the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti (IJDH), I was so excited I could hardly sleep. Against the wishes of my family members, who cleverly reminded me that those who are sleep-deprived cannot think properly, I went to sleep at three in the morning.

Three hours later, I woke up ready to go, and more energized than I had ever been at six in the morning. It was a sunny Wednesday morning, and the crisp morning air greeted me as soon as I walked out the door. I smiled at the sun and thought to myself, “I thought this day would never come.”

The euphoric feeling I had that morning made me look forward to a two-hour journey that would soon become exhausting.

Various times during the spring semester leading up to my internship, I genuinely doubted whether or not the first day of my internship would ever come. I had been interested in various issues, including human trafficking, immigration in the United States, and the human rights violations that Haitian citizens and Dominican citizens of Haitian descent were enduring in the country of my family’s origin, the Dominican Republic.

It took many internship applications and much research on social justice organizations for me to finally end up on the front steps of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti. This process began in October of 2015, and ended the following May, when I received my acceptance letter from IJDH.

The eight-month search for the perfect internship not only led me to doubt whether or not I would be able to obtain an internship, but also to doubt myself. I questioned my qualifications and intelligence. I wondered whether I was qualified to work in the fields I was interested in. I even questioned whether I deserved to be called a Sorensen Fellow. Every time these thoughts would swim through my head, they would manifest physically in my body; my palms got sweaty, my heart would beat faster, and my eyes would gaze into space, as my mind projected images of failure and of what would occur if I did not find an internship.

These doubts were put to rest soon after I walked through the doors of IJDH and was given my first assignment.

Upon completion of my internship at IJDH, I realized that the eight-month journey that led me to IJDH was more valuable than I could have ever imagined. There were many moments of desperation that almost made me lose hope; however, that journey tested my ability to remain patient and persistent when working towards my goals. The patience and persistence I developed in the long months leading up to my internship ended up being extremely useful that summer, when I spent weeks working tirelessly on projects for which I had no prior experience.
My arduous journey also led me to believe in destiny. Towards the end of my internship I understood why it had not worked out with any other organization: I was meant to spend my summer at IJDH all along.

Why IJDH? Why the need to work for Haiti?

My relationship with the issues that the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti addresses began long before I started interning there. Both of my parents emigrated from the Dominican Republic to New York City during their youth. As a result of this background, I have spent various years of my life living in my parents’ home country. I first visited La Hispaniola at the tender age of two. That trip was merely a vacation. However, later my visits turned into yearlong stays that eventually added up to almost half of my life.

The Dominican Republic was the birthplace of some of my childhood’s fondest memories. For various reasons, I moved to the beautiful Quisqueya, another name for the Dominican Republic, when I was four years old for a period of one year. I celebrated my fifth birthday in my grandmother’s humble home in the fluffiest pink dress I had ever seen. During this stay, my attachment to the island began to grow.

Two years later, at which point I was seven years old and living in the Bronx, I remember waking up in the morning and running towards my mother because I missed my grandmother and the food in the Dominican Republic (specifically the rice). I could not say that this is the reason why a few months later my mother moved us to the Dominican Republic for three years; however, in my mind, it surely was.

It was at the age of seven that I began to notice the social inequities faced by Haitians in the Dominican Republic. I would always see them from behind the fence of my grandmother’s front porch selling esquimalitos (frozen popsicles) or palitos de coco (coconut sticks). The one thing I always noticed about the Haitians selling goods near my grandmother’s home was how hardworking they were. I remember feeling bad every time I saw them passing by with buckets on their heads under the scorching Caribbean sun. Beads of sweat would be stringing down their foreheads and faces, but they maintained their smiles as they shouted through the streets the products they had for sale that day.

“Why do they do it?” I naively wondered.

Due to the long history that Haiti and the Dominican Republic share, racism in the Dominican Republic is alive and well. The issues between Haiti and the Dominican Republic stem from wars, slavery, and the difference in cultures, and are so complex that they need a book of their own.

In a video cleverly titled “Why the Dominican Republic Hates Haiti,” the narrator goes in-depth into the history between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The narrator states that Haiti occupied the Dominican Republic in 1822 for a period of 22 years. Furthermore, “during that time the Spanish-speaking Dominicans were restricted to speaking French and the Haitians enforced oppressive rules on labor and the redistribution of wealth.” This is not necessarily the reason why relationships are strained today; however, this is definitely where the problem began.

Dominicans do not necessarily treat Haitians differently because of the color of their skin. Although the “whiter is better” complex exists as a result of colonization from Spain, there are plenty of dark-skinned Dominicans because there were also a substantial number of enslaved Africans brought to that country. There has been animosity between the two countries for decades, and Dominicans simply reject Haitian culture.

As a result of this, I always saw people treat Haitians as if they were second-class citizens who did not belong in the country. Sometimes this consisted of verbal insults, and other times things got physical. Thankfully, my family never engaged in these activities nor encouraged that kind of behavior. I remember my mother telling me, todo el mundo es igual (everyone is equal).

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What is IJDH?
The director of IJDH, Brian Concannon, founded the organization in 2004 from his home on the west coast of the United States. Brian Concannon is a Georgetown Law graduate who courageously set out to create positive change in the world, something many of his colleagues in law school had likely written on their applications but have not gotten around to actually attempting.

If I had happened to cross paths with Brian in an airport, where he almost constantly was during my internship at IJDH due to his busy travel schedule, I would have assumed from his formal clothing and briefcase that he was just another executive. He is of average height, with salt and pepper hair and a reassuring smile that could make a stranger feel like he or she could trust him – a good trait to have as a lawyer. A characteristic that would have been impossible to deduce from his body language was his kindness. Although he traveled often during my internship, one thing that was clear to me was how important his work was to him, and how deeply he cared about the people of Haiti and those working alongside him.

Upon meeting Brian and interacting with him, it dawned on me how vital truly good leadership is for non-profit organizations. I viewed IJDH as a tree: Brian was the seed, his co-workers were the trunk and the branches, and the fruits of his labor were the positive things he helped bring about for the people in Haiti. An organization can only be as good as the people working for it.
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In the early years IJDH was being run from Brian’s home in rural Oregon. He eventually realized that the growth of the organization was hindered by its location, so he packed up his family and moved everything and everyone to Boston, where there happens to be a large Haitian population.

IJDH has a strong partnership with an on-the-ground organization in Haiti called the Bureau des Avocats Internationaux (BAI), the Office of International Lawyers. This partnership is the reason for IJDH’s existence. In 2004, when IJDH was created, Brian was living in Haiti at the time of the coup. He created IJDH to support and further strengthen the work of BAI. Before IJDH existed, BAI had received its funding from the Haitian government, but in 2004, the funding from the Haitian government stopped, and BAI transitioned into being fully funded by IJDH. Many organizations went in to help Haiti after the devastating earthquake in 2010; however, by then Brian’s organization had been established for nearly six years. Brian himself had started working in Haiti during the ‘90s with BAI, which demonstrated to me the long-term commitment and dedication he felt towards making Haiti a better place.

The issue areas that IJDH and BAI focus on in Haiti include, but are not limited to: fair elections, the immigration crisis in the Dominican Republic, and accountability for the ongoing cholera epidemic in Haiti. The BAI is made up of human rights lawyers in Haiti. The work they have done in Haiti is so high profile that the BAI director, Mario Joseph, has received many death threats due to his involvement in fair elections and his advocacy on other issues. From my perspective the most shocking threat of all occurred in 2004, when Joseph received a bullet in an envelope. He then relocated his family to Miami for safety. He lives alone in Haiti for fear that those looking to harm him would harm or kill his loved ones instead.

The relationship between IJDH and BAI is extremely important, not only because the BAI depends on IJDH for funding, but also because both organizations need each other to fulfill their purpose. IJDH not only funds BAI, but also represents the BAI in the United States and helps bring the attention of U.S. officials to Haitian issues. BAI serves as the eyes and ears of IJDH in Haiti by doing the on-the-ground work, thus allowing IJDH to do the necessary advocacy for Haiti in an efficient manner.

This is extremely important, because in some cases non-profits have done work for Haiti, with the intention of helping by building a school, for example, but without any idea how the infrastructure of Haiti’s education system works, and thus they were not able to carry out projects that were truly impactful or even sustainable.

Getting to IJDH

Reaching IJDH was a daily expedition. Every morning I had to be prepared to leave my home by 6:55 a.m. For the majority of the summer, my odyssey to IJDH consisted of taking two buses, one commuter rail train from Lawrence into Boston, and then two subway trains once I got to Boston. It took me approximately two hours to reach IJDH in the mornings. On the return trip, this time was extended to two hours and a half due to the rush hour traffic. I will not deny that my commute was rough; however, I learned much more than I could have ever imagined from taking public transportation on a regular basis. Having come from New York City, I am no stranger to methods of public transportation, though I had never before taken it for such extended periods of time or long distances.

A constant smell of body odor surrounded me in the subway as we were packed like sardines during rush hour. Every single time, it made me regret not having made getting a driver’s license a serious goal. That smell would have me feeling especially delirious on the afternoons I would get out of work feeling famished.

Every time I stepped into the steaming hot subway stations of Boston, I would picture all the hundreds of people surrounded by their own little worlds. In my head there were actual bubbles surrounding them. This thought originally stemmed from my being squished between two strangers, and realizing how that was the only acceptable setting for us to be touching in such an intimate manner. Initially, they were just sweaty strangers desperate to get
home. But then I started thinking of their humanity and realized that they were someone else’s mom, dad, child, brother, sister, or loved one. Every time we would be squeezed together, I tried to think not only of the person that was physically against me, but also of the individual world that I was interacting with. I came to see the subway as a “web connection.” The connections we had with our loved ones or our friends made us all connected in one way or another.

One particular day in the subway, I saw a woman crying silently. She was middle-aged and looked to be Hispanic. She seemed very sad, and I wanted to say something. I wondered what kind of pain was hurting her world, her bubble. But alas, though the web of the subway did allow us to come into contact with one another’s worlds, the social rules in place did not allow us to go beyond what we could see or feel from another person. It was almost taboo to speak to each other. All I felt I could do was turn away, and type in my phone: “I see your pain, but yet I must maintain a straight face.”

The Case of Cholera

The issue of cholera accountability was probably the one causing the most buzz in the office and on Twitter during my internship. IJDH was working alongside BAI to hold the United Nations accountable for the cholera contamination in Haiti. This was a very interesting issue for me to learn about personally, because there were many individuals, including myself, who had been under the impression that the United Nations was an amazing organization that did nothing but “good” work for the international community. Additionally, the cholera outbreak was something I had not heard about prior to interning with IJDH, despite the various trips I have taken to the island since the outbreak began.

It all began in 2010 after the earthquake in Haiti. The U.N. sent a peacekeeping mission to Haiti – the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti [MINUSTAH] – to relieve the chaos that had erupted in the country. The decision was made with very good intentions, but the plan did not go as the U.N. intended. Among the peacekeepers sent to Haiti were individuals infected with cholera. Unfortunately for the Haitians, waste containing the fecal matter of these cholera carriers was not disposed of or treated properly. The wastewater was carelessly poured into public canals in Haiti. Moreover, UN reports indicate that the maintenance of water treatment plants in peacekeeping camps was often ignored, and that authorities ignored laboratory warnings claiming that tainted liquids contained fecal contamination. As a result of these multiple instances of negligence, tragedy struck Haiti.

I still remember the day I began to learn the hard facts of the case. During my first day at the office, I kept hearing the word “cholera.” I knew what cholera was, but I was completely unfamiliar with what was happening in Haiti. That very first day, I was handed a copy of How Human Rights Can Build Haiti, written by Fran Quigley. The book focused on the challenges in Haiti, and on the efforts that BAI and IJDH were making to move Haiti toward becoming a better place. I was told to read the book on my own time. Given my long commute, I thought it would be a good idea to read on my way to work, but I should have imagined that the struggles in Haiti would not be a pleasant morning read.

Every time I stepped into the steaming hot subway stations of Boston, I would picture all the hundreds of people surrounded by their own little worlds. In my head there were actual bubbles around them.

It was a bright summer morning. I was waiting at the commuter rail stop in Lawrence to embark on my one-hour journey to the city of Boston. Once the train came, I made my way to my usual seat on the left-hand side of the train. I specifically remember the sunrays hitting my face and providing a sense of warmth and light that made me look
forward to opening the book in front of me. That sense of warmth and light soon disappeared after reading the first few pages of the book.

My stomach churned as I read, word by word, the descriptions of the devastating conditions that many Haitians were living in. After the earthquake, many Haitians lost their homes and resorted to setting up shantytowns with deplorable sanitation systems that ultimately exacerbated the spread of cholera. During the time I was interning, it was reported that an estimated 780,000 Haitians had been infected with cholera, and that 9,300 of them had died as a result.\(^3\)

One of the most memorable projects that I worked on at IJDH involved lobbying members of the U.S. Congress. The skills of patience and persistence that I had honed during my search for the perfect internship ended up being extremely useful for this project. As a group, our end goal was to get as many congressional signatures as possible on a “Dear Colleague letter” addressed to Secretary of State John Kerry. The Dear Colleague letter called on the U.S. State Department to push the U.N. to take responsibility for the cholera epidemic in Haiti.

Congressman John Conyers, Jr. [D-MI] and Congresswoman Mia Love [R-UT] originally wrote the Dear Colleague letter. For weeks we called and emailed hundreds of members of Congress to sign it. Although we were passionate about what we were doing and believed wholeheartedly in the cause, it was not easy to come into the office every day to do the same thing over and over again. Some of my fellow interns were even insulted by the office staff of several congressmen and women as a result of calling and emailing every day. Thankfully, our work paid off! The letter received a total of 158 signatures from members of Congress, who urged the United States to take a stronger stance against the U.N. for cholera accountability. The number of signatures and the bipartisan support was record-breaking for IJDH. Bringing the issue of cholera accountability to the attention of members of the United States Congress and obtaining their support, was one of my proudest accomplishments during the internship, and in my life.

Updates on the Case

In August 2016, a few weeks after I finished my internship at IJDH, news broke that the moment that IJDH, BAI, and the people of Haiti had been waiting for had finally arrived. The U.N. admitted that it had played a role in the cholera epidemic that had infected hundreds of thousands, and killed thousands, in Haiti. I was in the middle of getting ready to start my semester at Brandeis when I got the news from IJDH. I felt a mixture of gratitude for having had the opportunity to work for such an amazing organization, and pride at having contributed to positive change in the world.

Unfortunately, the moment was bittersweet. The U.N. only admitted its role after a panel of the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit upheld the U.N.’s immunity, and ruled that the U.N. could not be sued in American courts.\(^5\) This was not coincidental. The court case that IJDH and BAI filed against the U.N. in 2011 reached a standstill. Nonetheless, it was a step in the right direction, and soon afterward the U.N. Secretary-General made promises to put together a package to provide material assistance and support to cholera
victims in Haiti. After the decision was made, IJDH and BAI were given 90 days to decide whether or not they would appeal to the Supreme Court of the United States.

**The White Savior Complex**

The topic of the “white savior” was not one that initially came up during my internship, but rather during my mid-point check-in visit with Marci McPhee, the Sorensen Fellowship Director, and from then on I began to think about it seriously. Due to the fact that a good number of the people working at the IJDH office were Caucasian, I realized that it was of utmost importance to me personally to analyze how the “white savior complex” fit into the organization, if at all.

Historically, people have used the term “white savior complex” to refer to white individuals, typically American or European, going into developing countries or communities to try to “save” them. These individuals have usually had good intentions and intended to bring about “progress” in the communities they have gone into. However, a major issue has been that they have often gone in with cultural blindfolds on. Oftentimes when these “saviors” go into these areas, they fail to connect to the local culture and to understand the values and motivations of the people. This has been extremely problematic, because not understanding the people and the actual issues of a community leads organizations to implement programs that end up hurting the people they intended to help.

An additional issue with the white savior complex is that the white individual will always be the hero saving the person of color from distress. An article written by Celia Edell outlines this issue of racial hierarchy perfectly. She writes, “[It racializes morality by making us consistently identify with the good white person saving the non-white people who are given much less of an identity in these plot lines. It also frames people of color as being unable to solve their own problems. It implies that they always need saving, and that white people are the only ones competent enough to save them. This is very obviously untrue, and it’s a harmful message to relay.”

If there was one thing I learned during my introductory anthropology course at Brandeis, it was that across different cultures no one does anything that they consider crazy, no matter how crazy we, as outsiders of that culture, think it may be. Before beginning my work at IJDH, I questioned whether or not the work that IJDH did was efficient, given the fact that it was not in Haiti, and I worried that IJDH had no real connection to Haiti and was one of those organizations with the white savior complex that did more harm than good. Shortly after my arrival, I was pleased to discover that IJDH was anything but.

There were two factors that clearly demonstrated this. The first factor was the individuals who work at IJDH. They are deeply dedicated to the work that they are doing, and are intelligent and respectful of Haiti’s culture. In fact,
IJDH sought to inspire, not to gain pity. This taught me a lot about respecting the self-worth of the victims and the worth of the cause I was fighting for.

Brian had been working in Haiti since the '90s, the BAI has been the organization that has done the majority of the on-the-ground work. This has been very important, because no one else can know their culture and customs the way they do. The BAI communicates to IJDH the exact issues with which they need their help, which makes IJDH's work extremely efficient.

Furthermore, another thing I really appreciated about working at IJDH is that I felt that the organization gives Haitians a humane voice. Oftentimes, organizations exploit the victims that they are advocating for when it comes time to raising money or building their profile, but at every single point of the fundraiser we had over the summer, the staff members of IJDH took a step back to analyze the way in which they were portraying victims. There were many discussions about what the approach should be to engage donors in a way that would not mirror Sarah McLachlan's notorious animal cruelty commercial. IJDH sought to inspire, not to gain pity. This taught me a lot about respecting the self-worth of the victims and the worth of the cause I was fighting for.

The first part of our fundraiser consisted of sending emails, and for this I suggested that we use memes, because they are particularly appealing to the younger generation, which I thought might bring in more donations. The second segment of our fundraiser consisted of sending handwritten cards to potential donors and attaching a carefully curated letter from a cholera victim. We sifted through hundreds of letters and chose one we thought adequately depicted the victims of cholera crisis in Haiti and their humanity. This was our way of appealing to the donors' emotions, without belittling cholera victims or exploiting them. This was something that IJDH was very careful with, and something I had not previously thought about.

During this fundraiser I learned how hard it truly is to get people to support social justice financially. Charitable organizations seemed to have a much easier time getting funding than organizations such as IJDH, because it is much easier to support change that you can physically see. It can be very rewarding for donors to see that they are giving needy people supplies, like food and water, especially when they are shown sad pictures. However, when you ask them to support lawyers fighting for justice and accountability by a powerful organization like the U.N., it is a different story.

Charitable organizations show pictures of starving children, and everyone wants to help; the money comes flowing in. This practice could arguably be seen as exploitative. Charitable organizations often depict victims without their dignity in order to raise money. By this, I mean that victims are often depicted as weak and lacking a sense of self-worth, instead of as strong human beings making the most of difficult, often disastrous, situations.

Fundraising & Lessons Learned
One of the most important tasks I worked on over the summer, and one for which teamwork was essential, was the July Matching Campaign. One of IJDH's most faithful donors challenged IJDH to a matching campaign in July, which was specifically challenging because, as I learned at IJDH, July is the hardest month of the year in which to fundraise. Hence, it required the fundraising team to come together and strategize to find the most creative way to meet this challenge.

Victims are often depicted as weak and lacking a sense of self-worth, instead of as strong human beings making the most of difficult, often disastrous, situations. How should we appeal to people's emotions without exploiting the victim? Where is the line?
How should we appeal to people's emotions without exploiting the victim? Where is the line? These questions troubled me because the importance of the work IJDH is doing was extremely clear to me, and I wondered why more people could not see it, and how we could make them see it.

Final Thoughts
I will cherish for the rest of my life the lessons I learned interning at IJDH. I learned as much about myself as I did about the causes that I was working for, which is way more than I expected from a summer internship.

One of the most important lessons I learned was the importance of teamwork. I understood early on in my internship that an organization is only as good as the people working for it, but I also realized that nothing can ever be accomplished without teamwork, especially when it comes to social justice. The staff at IJDH demonstrated to me what it is like to work in a positive environment where everyone's ideas are respected and everyone wants to help each other. It not only gave me higher standards for my future work endeavors, but it also proved to me that achieving positive change in the world is impossible alone.

On the last day of my internship I reflected upon how, as a Dominican-American, I felt proud to have done work to benefit my sister country – Haiti. But at the same time I felt a measure of guilt, because I realized that no matter how much work I did, it would not be enough to make up for the suffering that Haitians have endured in my country, and unfortunately, still continue to endure.

Once again, I remembered that I would never be able to do it alone. I took a moment to pray for Haiti's future, and for better treatment of Haiti from other countries, especially the Dominican Republic. I hoped the people of my country would soon understand that *todo el mundo es igual*.

Notes

1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKqL8BZqo8Q


3. Ibid.


