

Maryse Pearce
2017 Sillerman Summer Fellow
Unbound Philanthropy

I applied for the Sillerman Summer Fellowship a few weeks into the Practicing Philanthropy course. As someone who has worked in nonprofits her whole life, specifically in programmatic work, I really enjoyed learning more about the fundraising and development aspect of nonprofit work. I loved learning about emerging philanthropic models and strategies for foundations and grantees to work together as partners. I especially appreciated being able to form a foundation with two of my classmates and make a grant to an organization we felt was doing important and unique work with currently and formerly incarcerated people.

Based on my experience in the class, I decided to apply for the Sillerman Fellowship. I wanted to learn more about philanthropy to see if it was a field I'd enjoy working in. My goals were to learn firsthand about the grantmaking process, be mentored by someone in the field, and put the skills I'd learned at Heller to use by funding, supporting, or evaluating social justice work. I was especially interested in foundations that focus on a particular issue, and the way this approach allows them to become more knowledgeable about an issue, connect grantees, and share best practices.

After interviewing at several foundations in New York City, I accepted a placement at Unbound Philanthropy. Unbound Philanthropy “works in the field of migration to transform long-standing but solvable barriers to the human rights of migrants and refugees and their integration into host societies.” Their focus areas are legal rights and protections; integration; and building public understanding. Established in 2003, Unbound is led by Taryn Higashi, who has been a grantmaker in the field of migrant and refugee rights for twenty years.

My main project for the summer was to research and write a memo on the question, “How do young people in the US learn about immigration?” in order to inform Unbound’s strategic planning goals. My goal was to understand how young people form their opinions about immigrants and refugees: is it through popular culture? Their peers and family? School? How is immigration taught in schools? Is there potential to teach it in a way that connects immigrant struggles if the early 20th century to immigrants now? To answer these questions, I conducted over a dozen interviews with people in the field of immigration, education, or both, including educators, publishers of educational supplements like Teaching Tolerance and Rethinking Schools, immigration policy advocates, and the Children’s Museum of Manhattan. I was also able to apply my years of experience working in LGBTQ advocacy and draw on strategies the LGBTQ movement has used to educate the public and advance public opinion.

One of the things I enjoyed the most about my fellowship was participating in the Good Neighbor Committee (GNC), a staff initiative that makes grants in the New York City area. This year, the GNC focused on central Long Island, an area currently receiving a lot of negative attention because of recent gang violence. The GNC ultimately decided to fund several organizations working to support Long Island’s South and Central American population in different ways. I loved seeing how they used their vantage point and resources

to analyze the landscape around an issue, convene partners, and help them set and achieve goals.

In addition to these projects, I was integrated into staff meetings and other work. I listened in on conference calls about changes to immigration policy. I attended grantee events, like the opening session of a conference hosted by New American Leaders, an organization that supports immigrants in running for office. I attended a half-day conference on philanthropy and democracy hosted by Philanthropy New York, a regional network. I drafted grant memos, sometimes emailing grantees feedback and questions to make their proposals as strong as possible. I also appreciated how closely I was able to work with the staff, especially Taryn. I learned a lot just from watching her interact with grantees and other funders and listening to the questions she asked.

I learned a lot during my summer at Unbound. From working with Taryn Higashi, I learned how to ask insightful questions and follow-up questions. I learned that funders often work together, co-funding an organization or project to ensure its success. I saw how much foundations value nonprofits working collaboratively. And I realized how much I enjoy working in organizations that take a bird's eye view of the field. I'm currently looking at program officer positions, but regardless of whether I stay in philanthropy or return to programmatic work, it's been extremely helpful learning to think like a funder.