

Sillerman Summer Internship: Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice

Karissa Ruck

In the summer of 2013, thanks to the extraordinary support and generosity--both financial and in terms of finding me a placement--of the Sillerman Center, I worked as an intern for the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice in New York City. Since high school, I have been involved with and keenly interested in the LGBTQ community and how best to counter the inequalities they face. My focus at the Heller School has been on LGBTQ youth homelessness, an issue which is exacerbated not just by inequalities based on sexual orientation and gender identity, but also race, class, gender, ability, and much more. I believe it is extremely important to approach this problem--and all problems that affect the LGBTQ community--with an understanding of these intersecting issues. This is why learning about Astraea's approach to philanthropy was such a rewarding experience for me.

Astraea makes grants specifically to organizations that are led by members of the communities they serve. The most rewarding part of my internship experience this summer was getting an inside look into the care that the grantmaking Program Team brings to their consideration of grantee organizations: Astraea's grants are made exclusively to organizations that show they have representation of queer women of color and trans people in their official leadership. Only about 6% of overall human rights funding goes to the LGBTQ community, and of this, only about 25% goes outside the US. In 2010 (according to the Foundation Center and the International Human Rights Funders Group), Astraea contributed the 7th highest grant amount to LGBTQ rights funding. But because they deliberately and strategically provide small grants to smaller, oft-overlooked organizations, Astraea provided the highest overall number of grants and was responsible for a much higher percentage of international LGBTQ human rights funding.

With Astraea, I also gained a deeper understanding of philanthropy itself, and its place in policy change and movement building. Astraea's grantee organizations are arranged into cohorts based on the kind of social change work they are doing: whether it be cultural change through the creation and promotion of queer art, or policy change through political advocacy and lobbying. Thanks to Astraea's understanding of these different methods of change and their importance in the movement as a whole, they are able to see the whole picture of the situation of LGBTQ people worldwide and strategically target the most effective and most supportive organizations. In addition, Astraea serves as a connecting point for a number of different groups. While I was there, we had a meeting with a representative from Political Research Associates, just to see if collaboration of some kind between them and Astraea would be desirable or helpful to either or both organizations. I also compiled a list and summary of some of the non-monetary requests grantee organizations have for Astraea, most of which involved connecting them to other organizations and donors. Astraea will be able to use this summary to bring individuals and organizations together.

My work at Astraea involved researching, writing, and otherwise contributing to Program Team. The most rewarding part of the internship was my involvement in grantmaking decisions. I began work in June, at the very end of the fiscal year, so I was able to see the final push to get recipient organizations chosen and grants made before year's end. Program Team was always welcoming and open to my ideas and contributions and I was able to argue for or against several potential recipient organizations. I really felt that my input was respected and that I influenced the final grantmaking decisions. In one cohort, I was actually assigned to be the main reader for an application. This was an exceptionally challenging (and rewarding) assignment, because I had to contact the applicant organization to ask for the missing aspects of their application and supplemental materials. I needed this information in a timely manner, so I was forced to be both demanding and understanding of the organization's situation. This characterizes grantmaking at Astraea as a whole: applicant organizations are held strictly to Astraea's mandate to serve small, queer women of color led organizations, yet Program Team always approached grant decisions with sincere regret at the prospect of turning any applications down. Finally, my most time-consuming project this summer was a pair of issue briefs I wrote on the topics of international UN advocacy mechanisms and sex work. Both were two-page essays to be used internally to brief staff and donors on the topics. Writing these briefs allowed me to explore my own interests and carry out research in a way that was valuable to my organization. They also gave me practice in researching and writing for a nonacademic setting, and the differences in the kind of writing that is appropriate for each.

Overall, my time at Astraea has been some of the most challenging and rewarding work of my life, and has taught me a great deal about researching and writing for a workplace setting, about LGBTQ advocacy and policy, about sex workers' rights (an issue I hope to explore further as I finish up my MPP and MBA), and about philanthropy. Thanks to the Sillerman Center's support, I was able to benefit from the unique opportunities of living and working in New York, and thanks to their choice of placement, I got to know an organization that approaches philanthropy with a powerful social justice philosophy.