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Summer Internship Report
Rape Crisis Cape Town
June-August 2003

Rape Crisis Website:
<http://www.rapecrisis.org.za>

In South Africa, it is estimated that a woman is assaulted every 23 seconds. For a country with one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, this is an alarming statistic. This summer, I had the chance to find out more about how such a discrepancy between law and reality happens. I flew to Cape Town, South Africa on June 18th, 2003 and began work at the Rape Crisis Center there the following day. This is a report of the weeks between June 18th and August 23rd.

My time at Rape Crisis Cape Town in South Africa afforded me some truly amazing experiences and life-altering moments. Working as an intern for this well-established feminist organization for a total of 8 weeks has left me with a better sense of how human rights doctrine can be implemented on a practical level in the global community as well as its shortcomings. As someone interested in pursuing a career in civil and human rights, whether it be through teaching, practicing law, or helping establish a non-governmental organization (NGO) like Rape Crisis, the opportunity to work with some very dedicated community activist individuals in South Africa was really a godsend.

How did I come to choose a Rape Crisis Center in South Africa? The answer is fairly simple. In human rights work, it is my personal belief that one must find a niche in which there will be both give and take between yourself as an individual and the greater organization as a whole - that is, you must do something that will leave both you as a person and your NGO better off. That sounds easy, but it is not. It is a balance I tried to

constantly maintain, working in the context of a country that often gets used by American and European students to do their own private research and esteem-boosting under the guise of altruism and generosity, a phenomenon which my co-workers did not hesitate to remind me of. My position of privilege as an American undergraduate who had the means with which to travel to South Africa was a continual factor in how hard I worked at Rape Crisis. Even the issue of what hours during the day I would come in to work became a politically-charged, class-based issue, since like most of the institutions in South Africa and Cape Town particularly, Rape Crisis is still hierarchically divided. There is still a great tension between the lesser-paid staff, who are office-bound between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. and tend to be people of color, and the higher-up counselors and legal advisers, whose educational backgrounds and flexible job descriptions allow them to decide when and from where they will work. Interestingly, as a volunteer intern, I was caught in between. In many ways, voluntarily coming to work at 8:30 or 9 a.m. every day and filling in for staff by answering the phones and greeting clients at the door became an act of solidarity. At the risk of sounding naïve, I like to think that little actions like coming to work early with the others, sharing my lunch, and even just inquiring after my co-workers' lives and families was what made my internship most successful.

But back to choosing a Rape Crisis Center: in my case, as a feminist activist who has worked with rape and trauma survivors for several years on the Bard College campus through BRAVE (Bard's Response to Rape & Associated Violence Education), I felt that counseling and working with people in crisis is something I could both do well and learn better, especially in a foreign social and political environment. Of course, it helped that I had been to Cape Town before to study human rights with the International Human Rights Exchange, for it is also essential to at least have a basic understanding and comfort with the environment in which you will be living and working.

In the end, I felt Rape Crisis educated me in so many ways just as I felt I had provided work very useful to them. As a hotline intake worker, I had to be trained to calmly deal with rape and sexual assault survivors in the moment, often while still in crisis, and often before they had been seen by any other doctor or counselor. With lots of help from my supervisor and the Counseling Coordinator, Kath Dey, I was able to "ground" or calm our clients to the point where they could begin the psychological

healing process. I learned how to network among social service NGOs in South Africa and how to refer people to the best places that could meet their needs. I began to recognize community faces and they began to recognize mine. In addition, the time I also spent working with the Center's Fundraising Committee to research sources of funding and learning how to write NGO grant proposals, often to American or other international grant-making organizations, made me feel a bit more secure about Rape Crisis' future.

I can honestly say that I've come away from this summer knowing more about what I can and want to give to the world when I graduate Bard. I know that human rights doctrine, as flawed as it is currently, is not a fruitless endeavor. It is not too Euro-centric or imperialist in nature, as it is often criticized to be. I know that if I continue to work with people, whether as a volunteer, a social worker, or a criminal justice legal representative, I can be a part of a rich albeit difficult political and social process of transformation.

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