



2010 Liman Summer Fellowship Final Report

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Internship: Oglala Lakota Court Appointed Special Advocates (OL-CASA)

Location: Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota

Internship Summary: From June to August, I stayed with the Oglala Lakota people of the Great Sioux Nation, who live on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. My placement was with the Oglala Lakota CASA program, which works to protect child victims of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse through a variety of legal and psychological interventions.

Final Report:

Sitting cross-legged on the packed dirt floor, I was immersed in the darkest of darks, suddenly understanding what my coworkers had meant by “womblike.” My boss, Arlana Bettelyoun, sat beside me while our case manager, Larry Swalley, was singing out long streams of melodies in the Lakota language, beating a rawhide drum, and adding water to the smoldering coals in the center of the *inipi* lodge. Wave after wave of steam drenched my skin, drawing out the intoxicating aroma of crushed sage leaves on our skin. Larry spoke now. “Tonkashila,” he prayed. “Grandfathers. We pray for Ashley today. In her weeks here, may she find what she is looking for.”

Needless to say, I knew by day three of my internship that this would be no ordinary summer.

My placement was with the Oglala Lakota Court Appointed Special Advocate (OL-CASA) program on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. Founded in 1997 as a

branch of the National CASA Association, OL-CASA trains volunteers for assignments to child abuse and neglect cases. The volunteer, called a CASA or Guardian Ad Litem (GAL), spends one-on-one time with their assigned child, acting as a reliable source of support and determining what kind of a placement is in the child's best interests. The CASA, making their recommendations directly to the judge, plays an important role in the case because they are a neutral party who has earned the trust of the child victim and has seen said child in situations the legal staff have not.

What makes OL-CASA different from the other 930 CASA programs in the United States, the spark that interested me in spending my summer with them, is that they are actively working to become an accredited, interdisciplinary Child Advocacy Center (CAC) with a focus on integrating culturally relevant practices into the fabric of their services. Pine Ridge is a rough place for a child to grow up – stable, two-parent households are rare (about 58% of grandparents are raising their grandkids), an 85% unemployment rate means that most live under the poverty line, and gang violence is commonplace. Believing that the heart of the problem is that the Oglala Lakota people are out of touch with their traditional culture, OL-CASA uses a Lakota-based approach to both bring perpetrators to justice and to help heal families affected by abuse.

To this effect, the most interesting document I studied this summer was the Oglala Sioux Tribe Child and Family Code, a lengthy legal document that combined standard U.S. Department of Justice child abuse operating procedures with a comprehensive overview of the traditional Lakota family structure. In Lakota, the word for “child” is *Wakanyeja* – in my study of the language, I have since learned that the prefix *Wakan-* means “sacred.” When OL-CASA teamed up with tribal elders to write the code, it was with the explicit understanding that, as sacred beings, all available energy must be focused on the protection of every child. Modern practices

are used only because they help support the vision shared by those interested in child advocacy on Pine Ridge – a safe childhood that leads to a content, productive adult life.

“Abuse against children is NOT traditional,” admonishes a brochure on the wall in the OL-CASA office. Pine Ridge’s child abuse rates – believed by some to be the root of the youth suicide epidemic that left at least a dozen dead in my time there alone – are stomach-turning. My first day on the job, set to work organizing a massive backup of paperwork, put my life on hold. Case files: a father explaining that his 3-year-old, whose jaw was fractured in three places and arm was snapped in two, had merely “tripped on the sidewalk.” U.S. Department of Justice debriefings: “Child Sexual Exploitations – Protecting Victims.” Laminated pictures drawn by abused children: a crayon scene of a father beating a pleading child with a belt. A wobbly scrawl reading, “Stop the child abuse. It is wrong to child abuse. Please stop the child abuse.” This was my orientation, and sitting on the cool tile floor, I felt more powerless than I ever have before.

As I buried myself in work, my goal became to avoid being consumed with all I couldn’t do, while trying my hardest to do those things I could. It was the only way I could cope. With three full-time employees and 644 Lakota children in tribal custody due to abuse and neglect, I learned how useful I could be to OL-CASA just by getting their constantly busy office organized. To this end, I paged through 13 years of collected paperwork, donations, and junk, scrubbing the office (located in the basement of a doublewide) head to toe. Through this, I was able to read dozens of documents, reports, and resources, which has made me fairly well-versed in child abuse terminology as well as the basic concepts of tribal law proceedings.

My other roles as the internship progressed included designing a website to spread awareness as well as collect donations, creating new branding for the organization (letterhead, fax cover sheets, expense reports, etc.), generating an Annual Report for the executive board, and

writing two twenty-page grant progress reports for the U.S. Department of Justice. Another major project was preparing for the Oglala Nation Annual Powwow, which included designing a presentation board for our information booth, making presentations to visitors at the Lakota Health Fair, and soliciting donations of over 300 new pillows and handmade pillowcases to give to our current foster kids. This work kept me busy, but weekends were time to unwind with my coworker Larry and his family – raising puppies, riding horses, and swimming in the dam.

These projects aside, my most memorable work experiences came from collaborating with two outside corporations. First was the Bridgespan Group, the nonprofit partner of Bain & Company, who I contacted in early July with questions about designing strategic planning initiatives for OL-CASA's future. Learning about how Bridgespan works in teams to create viable, measurable solutions for nonprofits has really made me look at the consulting industry with a fresh perspective. I was grateful to receive over three total hours of advice and support from a consultant experienced with the child abuse sector, completely pro-bono. The generosity of the organization, and the expertise they had to offer, has made me seriously consider the idea of trying my hand at consulting post-graduation, with the intent of moving into the social sector, designing new strategies to create stronger nonprofits.

During the last two weeks of my internship with OL-CASA, I was very lucky to work with two executive producers for ABC's Primetime and 20/20, who are in the pre-production stages of an installment in the *Hidden America* series, which focuses on the lives and challenges of children in impoverished areas. In the OL-CASA offices, we all sat down to brainstorm the various angles that the show could take. This was such a significant experience for me not just because I realize that the ideas I contributed will likely appear when the episode airs next winter, but even more importantly, I was shocked to discover just how much I could help. As a non-

Indian on a reservation often—and rightfully so—wary of outsiders, and in light of the prevailing modern belief that Indians should have sole sovereignty over their legal systems and futures, I realized early on in my internship that there was only so much I could do, even with an entire career devoted to tribal law. But when the producers turned to me for advice on how to earn the respect of the Lakota, using my experiences to judge how they should act while working on the reservation, I had answers. It made me realize how I had found a home with the Lakota people.

Spending my Liman summer on the reservation was not easy. It meant giving up regular contact with my friends, suspending access to amenities as simple as having a Wal-Mart less than 60 miles away. The rewards, however, are clear: living right in the middle of the community I was working for was an immersion experience like none other. If I could recommend anything to the program, it would be this: make a concentrated effort to challenge the next class of Summer Fellows to think outside city limits. So much work is needed in areas like Pine Ridge, and there is so much to be learned. Given encouragement and resources (contact names, organizations, etc.), I think many future fellows would jump at the chance to have a summer experience that leads to quizzical expressions and curious “you did *what* this summer?” questions. It’s hard to know what’s out there until you jump into a beat-up ’88 Chevy pickup and roll down the endless highways that lie just beyond your comfort zone.

It is a strange thing at the very least to live with each foot in a wildly different world, and to do so without leaving your home country often borderlines on the bewildering, but I wouldn’t trade this summer for the world. Every time I wrap myself in the traditional hand-sewn star quilt I was honored with my last week on Pine Ridge, every time I see a spectacular sunset, every time I burn a twist of sage and inhale the sweet scent of the *inipi* lodge, my heart goes back to the reservation –and the people who taught me to be strong, to always remember who I am.

Future Involvement Timeline:

- **August 20, 2010** – have a yearlong contract signed with OL-CASA to continue work on projects begun this summer (done)
- **August 27, 2010** – complete/submit OL-CASA annual reports and self-assessment (done)
- **Fall 2010** – Keep in contact with Arlana, create presentation for Palm Springs conference in December
- **Fall 2010** – design and execute a photography/fine art exhibition of works created in SD (proceeds will go back to OL-CASA)
- **December 2010** – volunteer with other OL-CASA employees at the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) Native Conference in Palm Springs, CA
- **January 23-19, 2010** – return to Pine Ridge to write year-end reports, etc.
- **Spring Break 2011** – National CASA conference volunteer, Chicago, IL
- **Fall 2011** – complete official training to be a CASA upon 21st birthday in October 2011

Additional Resources:

- The website I created for OL-CASA: <http://ol-casa-org.doodlekit.com>
- The personal blog I kept for the duration of the trip: <http://abliheca.wordpress.com/>
- My photography collection from Pine Ridge can be found here: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/49731292@N08/sets/72157624690600696/>
- My author page on Change.org's news portal (this is a journalism job I was offered in mid-July after my now-editor learned about my interest in Indian affairs and read my blog): http://uspoverty.change.org/blog?author_id=648