KCA Internship Reflection: The National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health

The National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health (NLIRH) focuses its efforts on helping Latinas and women of color. Currently, they have formal bases in areas with high concentrations of immigrants and serve everyone from young moms to seventy-year-old community leaders. However, they also do a lot of work with the LGBTQ community in these areas, and anyone else who wishes to join the movement is welcome. They call this target audience the Poderosas, which literally translates into “powerful women,” but embodies so much more than that.

Not only does the title of poderosa address the strength that they wish to have as a movement, it also helps individuals realize the strength they already possess that manifests in daily aspects of their lives. NLIRH works with a community that is constantly told they have no agency or autonomy in this country. Through the title of poderosa, NLIRH hopes to remind the women that they have already survived and thrived in their own communities and its time to grow that energy as a united front.

NLIRH seeks to address any challenges that hinder an individual from making their own decisions about the kind of family they wish (or don’t wish) to have. This umbrella is incredibly broad—anything from immigration reform to urban planning can fit under it. The organization doesn’t do the work all on their own, however. There is a lot of collaboration with other organizations that are doing similar work or at least working toward the same end.
NLIRH uses primarily three ways to address short and long-term issues in the community. Direct service, activism, and political participation are where most of the energy is concentrated. The institute holds events where they hand out condoms or bring women to health centers to obtain other services or resources they may need. The core of the community work is focused around direct service and activism. They bring much needed education into communities and train members from those communities to be leaders and organize their people. Activism is the second major part of what these community organizations do. They rally, march, and protest in hopes of bringing attention to a movement that is largely unrecognized. One of the women in the Virginia Latina Advocacy Network, is the founder of DREAMER’s Moms and was one of four who began the hunger strike in front of the White House last November to urge President Obama to push immigration reform. Just a couple of weeks ago, we held a rally in Washington D.C. as part of our Advocacy Summit to train new members in the ways to properly get a message across. Finally, the third pathway of political participation is one area that is still developing and growing, but that I think is looking to be incredibly powerful because it is led primarily through the communities themselves. Women go out and campaign, bring people to the polls if they can’t access transportation, educate others in their areas about the issues that affect the Latinx community and really do enact change in this way. The second part of this is the lobbying that the institute itself does. This is where they need to engage in the most growth because currently the biggest complaint we have received as an institute and a movement about our efforts is that we are not consistent enough. There are two or three weekends per
year where we all join forces and lobby together but our opposition is just too strong and constant to be overpowered by our voices if our voices aren’t as constant.

I would also argue that in some ways NLIRH also engages in the pathway of engaged scholarship although perhaps not as much as it should. However, the community model that they’re setting up, and the unity they are creating within the Latinx community is what is going to be the long-term sustainable solution. There are many problems that our community faces. They will hopefully change over time to be less about our immediate physical well being and basic human rights and into challenges about how to continue growth and development, but challenges will always arise in a community that is constantly evolving and changing, and welcoming new members. However, I think that the most important work NLIRH engages in is bringing that community together and reminding them of the power their voices have when they work in unison.

My role in all of this was by title, Community Mobilization and Education intern. I helped in the creation, revision, implementation, and distribution of educational materials. But beyond that I think my role was to provide support to anyone who needed it in the office. I was a different voice and someone else to bounce ideas off of. My job was to help develop curriculum but I was also able to become a part of this community and establish connections with both the people we work with and the staff in the office. I could not have been happier with my position. The amount of growth, and change that I have seen in myself is amazing and reflective of the organization itself.
The organization has seen a lot of change over the twenty years it has been in existence. It started off as five deeply concerned individuals working in a tiny office in New York City wanting to address the issue of abortion access for women and has just grown into a full blown movement. The institute is the only organization in the United States to focus specifically on Latina’s health issues. Just two weeks ago, they celebrated their twentieth anniversary as an organization and the stories of some of the women who have been there for all twenty of those years were incredible. Challenges they are facing have both changed and remained the same. The issues that we are facing have evolved but so has our community. There is this hope to the organization that the challenges we are facing now will not be the challenges we face twenty years from now and I would agree. I don’t think there will ever stop being a need for an organization like the National Latina Institute because immigrant communities will always be growing and changing and the work that the institute does in helping these communities unite and teaching them to self-advocate is and will always be necessary.