My experience at Girls Write Now has been more positive and more influential than I could have hoped for. It creates a space where the art community and community arts overlap; professional, published, and experienced women writers work together with high school students from under-served parts of New York so that they, too, can have their voices heard. What drew me to the organization was that it represented a conglomerate of three of my central interests: creative writing, feminist rights, and social work and youth education. Turns out, GWN proved to be even more than that.

Creative writing has always been a helpful mode of self-expression for me. To see how inspiring and useful it is for high school girls has been profoundly moving. Not only is writing an apt way for a young person to create art and explore the self, but I've discovered it's an extremely powerful way to empower young women – many from backgrounds with few resources and support – to find a loud, articulate voice. Some of the girls involved in GWN are audacious and confident, others are reserved and shy; regardless, an astonishingly self-assured voice comes from each girl on the page. I felt consistently touched and moved by their creative fervor and willingness to share their intimate stories through writing. Writing is a huge part of my identity, but it took me a while to realize that exposing vulnerabilities and taking risks is what makes writing such a powerful art. These girls, some only 15 or 16, have already made this realization! Writing has encouraged them to see their self worth.

Although I wasn't working as a one-on-one writing mentor for the mentees, I was helping form exercises and prompts for the Girls Write Now genre workshops. For the TV Sitcom Screenwriting Workshop, I researched everything from the perfection of Tina Fey's one-liners in 30 Rock, to the personality traits of the caricatures in Friends. In the process of brainstorming what the GWN mentees could learn from TV shows (and female TV show writers!), I learned some tips that may have even helped with my own fiction. Similarly, examining how journalistic reporting can be an entertaining – as well as informative – narrative, for our Science Journalism Workshop, lead me to rethink my own relationship with nonfiction writing.

I also blogged for Girls Write Now about the power of visual narratives (how to use photography and images as a starting point for the creative process), about workshops and guest speakers (like Ana Castillo and Farai Chideya), and with tips for young writers (where to read and write on a budget, awesome locations like libraries and hotel lobbies to people watch and do writing exercises). All these exercises made my own writing stronger.

Just as I seriously consider myself a writer, I have always thought of myself as an avid feminist. Unfortunately, I've never been able to put this into far-reaching practice (beyond, I suppose, my overall life choices). Girls Write Now has allowed me to more directly promote female empowerment. I've spent quite a bit of time at my internship researching role models for these young women, thinking about what topics and discussions would encourage positive goals. Also, GWN exposed me to the female-centric literary arts which I had no exposure to prior. But my strongest connection to feminism didn't actually come from the explicit work I was doing to help the GWN programs and workshops; it came from the office atmosphere.

Starting off at Girls Write Now, I wasn't expecting to be surrounded by positive and engaging women. Or at least, to the degree that I have been. Every single woman who works at GWN has an avid history with social work, literacy, and the arts; to top it off, they are generous, patient, and welcoming individuals. I felt like my voice was heard, my feedback valued, the skills I have to offer (bilingualism, writing and blogging experience, photographing, experience with children) were valorized and put to good use. I never sensed a social hierarchy or competitive atmosphere. GWN felt like an office that embraced equality, where each
person’s role was appreciated. A workplace that lacks prejudice and judgmental behavior is the ideal workplace. It also reflects the ideals of feminism.

I had very little experience with social work, mentoring, and high school education before working at Girls Write Now. Sparked by my internship, I’ve become more interested in teen development and the role of mentoring in young people’s lives. Assisting in free-writes, finding ways to improve the mentor-mentee relationship, and helping organize the CHAPTERS reading series opened my perspective on the type of lifestyles young women and teens face coming from an under-privileged urban scape. I never had a mentor growing up; GWN helped me see how useful a mentoring relationship can be for both mentee and mentor, especially in such a chaotic and stressful environment like New York City. Watching both the mentees and mentors escape their usual routine (high school, home troubles, work, etc.) to be with someone and bond over a very important thing –writing– made me value more the potential writing has to be both an art and method for improving self-esteem and exploring one’s identity. It’s made me see how writing is a tool for youth to be self-reflective, self-respecting, and also self-critical.

Besides bettering my skills with computer programs that are common ground in nonprofits (like Salesforce and DonorPro), I am grateful that GWN encouraged me to work on tasks I truly enjoy. I have becoming stronger at communicating, while spending my day doing things I like: blogging, organizing events, researching, reaching out to prospective mentees and mentors. Ultimately, I’ve spent almost four months helping an organization inspire young women to pursue creativity and cultivate their voice. I can’t think of a better way I’ve ever spent my Mondays and Fridays.