

What I learned with Gray Panthers in Summer 2015

The past twelve weeks exposed me to and inspired me to think about a variety of aging issues at the individual, local, national, and global levels. I heard older people talking about how afraid they were to cross a road, how they were treated in nursing homes, and even how they were accused of being witches. I thought about the systematic ageism in my hometown, in the workplace, and in national policies around the world. Meanwhile, I realized how rapidly the world is aging and yet how little attention the society is paying to older people. Unlike the youth, older people do not seem like the driving force of a country's economy; the world is not willing to see older people as its future – as I listened to diplomats and NGO representatives eloquently emphasizing the importance of helping and supporting the youth at the UN, I, an eighteen-year-old girl, was not only sad but kept asking myself: so how about older people? How can we mainstream their rights and make them one of the national and global priorities? Through various conferences at the UN, I was made aware of a very large and complicated range of challenges humanity is facing today, and the more I learned, the more clearly I realized the difficulty of advocating for older people's rights, which is unquestionably important but seriously unrecognized among all those challenges.

This internship also allowed me to take a closer look at the operations of nonprofit organizations, including local organizations like Gray Panthers and global institutions like the UN. On the one hand, people's passion for daily work and for events going on in the field, which I rarely see in many workers at for-profit companies, inspired me and warmed my heart. On the other hand, I regret seeing the inefficiency and the lack of movement caused by various inevitable and practical reasons. Through first-hand experiences, I began to truly understand how the lack of funding, paid employees, and an office limits the capacity-building and functioning of a nonprofit organization. Besides, I learned to realize the challenge of reaching a social goal, attracting public interest and gaining public recognition at the same time. Nevertheless, I also saw increasingly many opportunities for nonprofit organizations: fundraising, searching and applying for grant opportunities, using social media, participating at the UN with the ECOSOC status, and working in partnership with other nonprofit organizations and the government.

Without experiencing the whole world of the UN, I was fortunate enough to see and participate in a growingly important part of it: the part where NGOs are treated as "other stakeholders". I was surprised that the UN programmed and hosted various workshops and educational opportunities specifically for NGOs, and would make more efforts in this area. I was also not expecting diplomats from a wide range of countries to sincerely listen to NGOs, consider their information, and fulfill their requests in action—some even took the initiative to cooperate with NGOs that are not from their countries. Although I am still unsatisfied with the lack of recognition of NGOs and their lack of power at the UN, I am optimistic about NGOs' growing influence at the UN in the coming years. However, one thing I was not able to fully understand is what concrete

difference the UN is making to the world. Admittedly I did not see much behind the scene, but during the various conferences I attended, diplomats were only reporting the current situation in their own countries for most of the time regardless of the agenda, and there was hardly any “interactive” discussion. I was told that the diplomats at the UN could do nothing other than following the instructions from their capitals, which base their decisions mostly on the circumstances at home. I observed that although there are six official languages at the UN, there were many occasions where English (sometimes with one other language) was the only way to communicate, and many people sent by their capitals or local NGOs were therefore not able to participate. These and many other factors made me doubt the efficiency and efficacy of the functioning of the UN.

One of the most invaluable parts of the internship for me was to know, interact and learn from a lot of people. I am very grateful for getting to know several people who are not only professionally exceptional but also have a big dream and a big heart. Their existence inspired me to pursue a career that has values other than financially supporting a decent and comfortable life for my family and myself. Thanks to this internship, I also began to understand the saying “it is all about personalities”, which is crucial but I do not usually think about when I work with people. Besides, I gained deeper understanding of the value of cooperation: effective cooperation makes use of different skills and experience people have, and makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

This summer I also learned several important work habits. First, always be early rather than late; let people know as soon as possible when plans change. Second, keep a detailed, step-by-step log of the projects that have multiple stages or last a long time, so I can always know where I should try again when something goes wrong in the process; keep all the emails and information organized and at hand, so I can use them immediately when there is an urgent need. Third, repeat, but also think about making a change, because seemingly similar tasks can add up and require a more organized, careful and holistic approach. Last but not least, express appreciation to everyone I work with.

I never expected the past twelve weeks with Gray Panthers would have been such a comprehensive learning experience for me. I saw a more complicated and crueler world, but meanwhile kept my faith in humanity and social progress. I know this internship would influence me significantly in making my future life decisions.