

ASIAN AMERICAN SUMMER COMMUNITY FELLOWSHIP SUMMER 2013

By Stephanie Bergren, Class Of 2014

For eight weeks this summer, I interned at South-East Asia Center (SEAC), an all-encompassing social service agency, funded by generous donors and the Asian American Studies department at Northwestern through the Asian American Community Summer Fellowship. Before I started, I had a vague concept of what I would be doing: helping Asian Americans apply for government programs and find more resources for my senior anthropology Capstone paper/thesis. I did accomplish both of those things, but it was a much more impactful experience, emotionally and educationally, that I could have imagined. At Northwestern, I have the privilege to learn from some of the best educators about the Asian American diaspora, but community involvement is a necessary part of a complete education. Even now, I cannot claim to fully understand the lived experiences of minority populations, but I have a more informed picture of their lives, the necessity of social service agencies and the empathetic people that work there, the power of government, and the interactions between these three bodies. Most importantly, SEAC makes positive changes in people's lives, and it was an honor to be part of that process.

South-East Asia Center is located in the Uptown-Edgewater area of Chicago. They have three main areas of programs: Adult Programs, Social Programs, and Child Programs. Adult Programs mainly service seniors with Golden Diners (a government subsidized hot-lunch program), ESL classes, and Adult Day Care (for seniors with Alzheimer's or dementia). Social Program help individuals or families apply for government assistance programs like Food

Stamps, energy assistance, health care, and citizenship. Child Programs provides subsidized summer school, day care, and after-school care for families with children, ages two to twelve, who live in the Uptown-Edgewater community. Because the case workers at SEAC are fluent in Cantonese, Mandarin, and Vietnamese, Chinese and Vietnamese speakers come from all over the Chicagoland area to receive services because language services are hard to come by. There are many social service agencies throughout Chicago, but without SEAC there to provide cultural understanding and language skills, Asian Americans in Chicago would not be able to benefit from government programs set up to help them.

I primarily worked in the Social Programs department doing various jobs as needed, though I spent some time as a teacher's assistant for the summer school program, and had a lot of direct interaction with the clients as I managed the waiting area. When someone came in, I would ask why they came to SEAC and screen them for whichever program they were applying for if they spoke English and hand them a number. It was not a glamorous job, but I understood how welcome my presence was to the clients and to the case workers because I was able to help speed things along, while providing an empathetic ear. The nature of social service agencies is that they are understaffed and behind on paperwork due to budgetary reasons; they are built to operate at minimum capacity. However, because of the AACSF and because SEAC did not have to pay me, less mistakes were made and clients were served faster. In working with low-income populations, this is especially important since taking time off of work is a burden for many of these clients.

My internship at SEAC gave me proof that individuals can make a difference and provided me with great amounts of knowledge that will allow me to serve people better in the

future. I was struck not only by how necessary Social Security, Food Stamps, energy assistance and many other programs are for low-income households, but also how much farther the government has to go if it really aims to serve its people. One woman called inquiring about Obamacare and whether or not she qualified for free or subsidized insurance. She was younger than 65, zero-income, and had only been in the states as a permanent resident for 2 years, which meant she qualified for neither subsidized Obamacare nor Illinois Medicaid expansion. The only benefit would be that she would not be penalized for not having insurance. My supervisor asked me, "Do you think this is fair? She came to the United States for a better life and the government won't help her." I had a flashback to Professor Jinah Kim's class called "The American Century in Asia" where we discussed whether the American Dream is attainable for all residents of the United States and basically concluded that it is currently not possible, but that it should be. This instance, like many others I had during my internship, made me think about the real-life individuals who experience inequalities as a result of government policies or social inequalities. If you can put a name or a face to an unjust action, the desire to make the change grows exponentially.

I have known for the past couple years that I am interested in eliminating inequalities, but through the AASCF and reflection, I have understood that I will not be satisfied sitting idly by and complaining about racism or classism on Twitter. There is power within one individual to make a difference, and I want to thank the Department of Asian American Studies and various donors for granting me this opportunity.