Internship Report: Renewal House, Nashville, TN

This summer, I worked as an intern with the Children’s Program Coordinator at Renewal House, Inc., a residential addiction treatment facility where women live with their children while they are in active recovery, in Nashville, TN. Renewal House’s treatment program, which helps guide the residents through the various stages of recovery and support, implements individualized case management from licensed social workers with assorted levels of experience and areas of expertise. The Children’s Program Coordinator is essentially responsible for the case management of each child who lives at Renewal House. Throughout my time there, the number of children whose mothers were involved in the residential program fluctuated from nine to fourteen. Because of the considerable case load, as an intern to the CPC, I was responsible for many typical administrative tasks such as filing, filling out forms, answering phones, and organizing paperwork. In addition to these, I was allowed to interact one-on-one with each of the women involved in the program. I learned how to administer various developmental assessments to determine the progress the women’s children were making—socially, emotionally and cognitively—as well as how to evaluate potential consequences that the mothers’ lifestyles and interactions within their addictions may have had on their children.

One aspect of my internship that most stands out to me is that, during the last week and a half of my internship, my advisor was out of the country on vacation, therefore I was responsible for all of the duties of CPC during that time. While members of the Renewal House staff were available and willing to help when I asked for it, I was essentially on my own in my tasks for that time. I was responsible for setting up individual meetings with every single resident to discuss each of their children’s progress within the past month, which, honestly, was quite a handful. As a side note, during the time I was at Renewal House without direct supervision from my advisor, the daycare which ten of the eleven children over whom I was responsible was shut down. Needless to say, the final week of my internship was chaotic and stressful; I loved it.
In addition to my tasks in assisting the CPC, I was also responsible for contributing to an impact study which was being built to assess which factions of Renewal House’s programming were contingent with the most success rates among women who had completed the program. This assignment necessitated my locating and retrieving data from hard-copy files from as many as ten years prior. I was able to input a considerable amount of new data into the study. I also set up a new system within the study so that the next intern who is confronted with the huge task of processing so much data might have a slightly clearer starting point.

Working on the impact study was not necessarily a high-pressure situation for me in my internship; I was told from the beginning that it would be impossible for me to finish, so I was able to put the study on the backburner and shift my focus to the things that were most important to me. A big part of Renewal House’s program is group sessions; the women are required to attend several weekly sessions both in addition to and as a part of the Intensive Outpatient Program which they must complete at the beginning of their residency at Renewal House. The group sessions covered a wide range of topics such as Spirituality, Co-occurring Disorder Education, Parenting, Self-esteem and Budgeting. Throughout my internship, I regularly attended the Parenting, Co-occurring Disorders and Spirituality groups. The Parenting group was led by a counselor outside of Renewal House; she came every week to teach a state certified curriculum via the Exchange Club Family Center in Nashville. In these groups, I was responsible for keeping attendance records and filling out individual participation evaluations most weeks, which were used both for Renewal House’s and the Exchange Club’s files. For the most part, I just sat in on the Co-occurring Disorders Education group; however, I was asked to lead one of the sessions toward the beginning of my internship. I was given a topic (self-soothing) and some literature on the subject; I was basically asked to facilitate a conversation among the women about what it means to self-sooth and why it is important. I received positive feedback from the women in my group and thoroughly enjoyed participating. I have to say that I was probably most involved in the Spirituality
group; I had a wonderful working relationship with the staff member who generally lead the group, and he asked me to take over in his absence several times. Again, I thoroughly enjoyed being able to facilitate conversations among the women and help guide them through their personal, spiritual growth and thought processes.

I am hesitant in my discussion of what I learned from this internship; I do not know that I could ever fully communicate all that I gained in my experiences at Renewal House. On a purely professional level, I am much more focused in terms of my future goals; I strongly feel that I know exactly what I want to do and where I am headed now. Prior to my internship at Renewal House, I thought that I wanted to pursue a Master’s degree in Social Work and be a case manager at a non-profit organization. Having had the opportunity to actually participate in this type of organization, I now know that being a case worker would not satisfy me. After I graduate from Sewanee, I will pursue a Master’s degree in Family and Relationship Counseling. I still aspire to work pretty strictly within the non-profit sector; I have merely identified that I thrive on and am most talented at working on a more personal level with clients (or residents, or participants—I am still not comfortable with what to call the women I worked with). I believe that being a social worker is an extremely noble cause, and I love it. That being said, I would not be fulfilled in a job in which considerable time is spent acting as a liaison between clients and outside organizations—such as Child Protective Services, the Department of Human Services, the foster care system or the legal system in general. I had not really considered how much time would be devoted to facilitating those relationships as a social worker. If I had not participated in this internship, I believe it is highly likely that I still would have pursued a degree in Social Work and then been dissatisfied with my choice once I found out what it actually meant.

On a much more personal level, my internship at Renewal House was hugely influential in terms of facilitating my personal growth. I believe that I am called to help people; I tend to be empathetic to a fault. Working in this high-stress, highly emotional environment forced me to develop some personal
boundaries that I had never allowed myself to put up previously. I learned that I cannot “fix” people; I can only help them when they ask for it, and I can only give as much as they are willing to receive. I learned that it is okay to be overwhelmed by my surroundings and seek solace—even if that means telling women who are asking me for help that I am incapable. I learned that saying “no” is okay; I also learned that it is good and healthy to take care of myself instead of fully focusing on others sometimes. I learned that people who ask me for help do not get mad at me for holding up my boundaries; I also learned that, the vast majority of the time, when residents do get mad—and, of course, they do—it is not about me. I learned not to take things personally. I learned that I can care deeply for an individual without taking on her problems as my own. I learned that I am fully capable, both emotionally and professionally, of doing all of the things I have suspected for so long I was called to do.