

## **An Internship in Rural Uganda Helping Women Living with HIV**

The International Community of Women Living with HIV Eastern Africa (ICWEA) is a regional chapter of the global International Community of Women Living with HIV, the only organization run for and by HIV positive women. The global organization was founded in response to a desperate lack of support, services and information available to HIV positive women. In 2007, ICWEA was formed as an autonomous network of the organization operating in five countries: Burundi, Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania. ICWEA believes that gender inequalities and lack of sexual and reproductive health rights for women are at the heart of the epidemic so they draw upon the lived experiences of women living with HIV to guide their programming. The participatory processes that ICWEA employs ensure that their work addresses the needs of women of all ages living with HIV and works from the ground up.

ICWEA advocates within three thematic areas with the issue of violence against women cross-cutting them all. The first is ensuring that HIV positive women have access to care, treatment and support, including prevention techniques. Coincided with this is working to address and treat Tuberculosis and HIV co-infection. The second advocacy technique aims to protect the sexual and reproductive health rights of women, including maternal health. Lastly ICWEA looks to create meaningful involvement of women living with HIV in all levels of policy and decision-making processes. The organization is building a collective political and civil society voice ranging from local to national levels holding governments and institutions accountable to their commitments to the HIV positive community.

When I arrived at ICWEA it became clear that my main task was to be writing grant applications for ICWEA. The organization has no small donor fundraising base and thus most of its income arrives in the form of larger scale donations and grants from long held relationships

with stakeholders. Grant research and writing occupied most of my time and as I had never written such a formal grant proposal before, I spent a lot of time prepping for the task. Yet I felt that my previous fundraising and development skills would assist me in the writing process. I also spent a fair amount of time on the web looking for other grants to apply for, mainly from Western organizations such as the Ford Foundation, the Coca-Cola Company and the Elton John AIDS Foundation.

ICWEA has a lot going on all the time. They are hosting conferences, attending meetings, running programs and working to ensure that the voices of HIV positive women are being heard. The office had a small number of employees, 13 full time, although only 8 actually working within the office, and 2 volunteers, and this made it difficult at times to get someone's attention when I had a question about a certain program being developed or who was on the ICWEA board, but once all the information was gathered the grant writing went well. I feel confident (and hopeful) that ICWEA will receive some money from some of the organizations I applied to; although unfortunately ICWEA will likely not know for months to come if my efforts were successful.

Beyond grant writing I also found myself attending meetings and conferences on behalf of and representing ICWEA. These were some of the coolest experiences I had while working there because I could see how clearly well respected ICWEA was in the HIV/AIDS community, not only in the region, but globally as well. I would take notes and write reports surrounding the meetings to share with the office and a few key stakeholders. It was in these meetings that my knowledge surrounding HIV expanded the most because so many organizations would be present sharing their ideas that I was able to hear many opinions and ideas surrounding the epidemic and what the next steps should be in terms of stopping the spread of HIV.

Over the course of my internship at ICWEA I developed a set of skills that will take me far into my career field. As I said prior, I had never done any grant writing prior to this summer but after writing four grants and a couple concept notes I feel that I can confidently put on my resume 'prior grant-writing experience'. Although unfortunately it will be unclear how much fruit will come of my labor, by applying to these different organizations that ICWEA had been previously unaware of, I have introduced to them to new potential revenue sources in the future. I also created a plan for a small-scale fundraiser that ICWEA can implement at any point. They are looking to build their database of small donors and although I could not help them run their first campaign, I feel confident that the step-by-step guide I have created for them could be utilized at any time. Another small task of mine was to continually edit documents that were to be put on the website, sent to donors, distributed at events etc. and although this was a small part of my time there, I think it greatly helped the employees of ICWEA not only feel more confident about the work they had done but also increased their editing skills.

I learned many skills throughout my time spent in Uganda, both in and out of the office. I gained a lot of confidence when it comes to speaking at high-level important meetings. At the first meeting I attended with ICWEA there were representatives of the Ministry of Health, UNAIDS and UNWOMEN present and I felt very hesitant to say my opinion but after some coaching by ICWEA staff I felt confident enough in my ideas and thoughts to speak up during said gatherings. My writing skills have greatly improved from all the editing and grant writing done throughout my time here and that will serve me greatly as I begin to write my senior thesis this coming fall. I also learned the patience needed in NGO work. Sometimes things do not get done on time, sometimes people are late, sometimes people do not give you what you need the

first time you ask. I have witnessed first hand all these things happen and as someone who wants to pursue a career in this field it was good to experience them as an intern first.

After this experience I still want to enter into the non-profit field after graduation.

Through my grant writing this summer I was able to work more closely with the programs team than I had in the past and this has certainly impacted what sector of the non-profit field I wish to enter. I liked being able to see tangible effects of advocacy and programming on women living with HIV as well as use my creative brain to come up with new and innovating techniques for accomplishing goals set by ICWEA. Last summer I worked for a US based non-profit that operated in developing countries across the world but I relished working in Uganda this summer and seeing the results on my doorstep when I went home from work. I think in the future I would like to work for an organization that provides in-country service as it leads to less cultural barriers, less power dynamics and more ability to see what is happening in front of you rather than relying on eyes and ears in other places. This past summer of discernment has been wonderful, fulfilling and full of growth – thank you for providing me the funds to travel to Kampala, Uganda and work for the International Community of Women Living with HIV.