Michelle Lopez - Liberty in North Korea

Where was your internship (Company and City)?
My internship is a traveling internship, so it takes place all across North America, from as south as the Headquarters near Los Angeles, to as north as Quebec City, Canada.

Tell us about your internship?
I am what is called a nomad for the organization Liberty in North Korea. Liberty in North Korea, or LiNK, is a grassroots nonprofit that seeks to bring an end to the crisis in North Korea, by shifting the focus from the politics to the people, raising awareness, and rescuing and providing resettlement support to North Korean refugees hiding in China. As a nomad, I have been living on the road for over 2 months. We are the Northeast team, which means we visit colleges, high schools, churches, and other venues across the Northeast, holding events in which we talk about the North Korean people - their challenges, changes they are making, and how we can help. We seek to grow the global movement of support for the people. Living on the road, we drive a LiNK van, and stay in contact's houses, dorms, couches, floors, etc. It is really cool to live on the road, and be able to share the stories of the North Korean people with thousands of people across the continent. We do 5 weeks of training in Southern California, and then hit the road for 10 weeks in 5 teams of 3 people.

How did you find your internship?
Since the club, Students for Global Change, heard about LiNK, 2 teams of nomads from LiNK have already come to Oswego to present, during the last 2 semesters. I went to the presentations, which at the time were documentary screenings, and thought what they were doing was awesome, so I talked to them about it, found out they were hiring for spring, and applied online. I now was a part of the 3rd team of nomads to present at Oswego, mid-April, which was really cool!

What is your major and did it influence your decision to become an intern?
I am a Global and International Studies major, which influenced me because after learning about what was going on in North Korea, especially the crimes against humanity committed by the regime, it became clear that this is one of the greatest challenges facing humanity today. I have learned about and studied so much oppression that has occurred in the past, but knowing this was occurring today, I saw it as the perfect opportunity to make use of what I had learned to make a direct impact on so many people's lives. I felt that I could no longer simply learn about the past and do nothing about the present, and this was a great way to get involved directly.

What are your main responsibilities as an intern?
While we are in the office in LA for 5 weeks, we do a lot of studying about North Korean history, the current situation, as well as the organization itself. In addition to learning this, we are also responsible for booking our own events! That means we are calling and emailing venues all across the continent, reaching out to people and planning out our itinerary for the road. Once on the road, we are responsible for giving presentations about the North Korean people, connecting people with opportunities to get involved, raising funds for the rescue missions, and communicating all of this back to headquarters.

What type of experience have you gained so far that you wouldn't have learned in a classroom?
The amount of public speaking practice I have gained is something you can learn only by spending an entire semester as a speaker! A self-proclaimed introvert, I now feel so comfortable in front of audiences, and even talking to strangers passing by if we set up a table. This has given me a lot of confidence to be an advocate for what I believe in front of any audience - we present everywhere from rural middle schools to Ivy League schools. I have also become comfortable reaching out to people who have never heard of our organization, explaining our purpose and seeing if they would like to bring us to their school. I have learned that many times all you have to do is ask, and you will find amazing people who care, and can connect you with so many more people and resources. Also, the very experience of living on the road is something you could never get in a classroom.
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What is the most exciting part of your internship?
Seeing new places and meeting new people! Probably the most exciting thing is traveling so much - going to completely new places - for me it was driving through the Mojave Desert, and going into Quebec City, as well as exciting places I had been to, like New York City, DC, and Boston. However, the most rewarding experience is meeting absolutely amazing people in these places! From North Korean refugees to incredibly passionate high school students, we meet people from all over the world whose stories and passion are so inspiring. We are able to connect with the very people who care the most about this issue, as well as meet people who have no idea, but who are so interested in making a difference after learning about it. Everyone is so incredibly kind, generous, and unique.

Do you have any suggestions for students who would like to do something similar?
My main advice would be just do it! One of the reasons I picked this internship is because I could literally not think of any other internship where you get to spend the semester going on an amazing roadtrip to grow a movement that is making the rescue of refugees half-way across the world a reality. When you find an opportunity like this, do not pass up the chance - do it while you are still at the perfect time to do so. So many of our supporters on the road tell us one of their biggest regrets is not doing something like this when they were our age. When LiNK first came, I thought I’d be a nomad after I graduated, but when they came the next semester, I thought, what am I waiting for? One other thing is that for this type of thing, the most important thing is passion - LiNK doesn’t hire based on who has prior experience traveling the country talking about North Korea, since that would probably be none! You are doing an internship to learn and gain experience, so you don’t already have to be an expert on the issue. If you want to work for a cause you believe in, just know that passion, energy, and a desire to learn a lot and work really hard will be your most important assets in working for causes such as this.

Do you think your internship will play an important role in your education and career?
Absolutely. I always really cared about global issues, but I wasn’t much of an activist. I know that in the future I will not separate education from activism, and that I will continue to be actively involved in this movement, as well as others, in my remaining time as a student. This internship has definitely set the tone for my career - I have been able to talk to people in the most direct way, in a true face to face grassroots mobilization type of way, and see the direct impact that this has on what the organization is able to do. I want to make sure that in my future career (most likely in the nonprofit sector) I am directly working with the people, and directly making an impact. This internship has definitely set the bar for that.

Do you have any internship advice you would like to pass on to other students?
Yes, I would like to emphasize - never underestimate your power to get the internship of your dreams. When LiNK came to my school, I found out that the deadline was the next day. By the time I applied, the priority deadline had already passed, so I assumed that I was too late. However, I applied anyway just to see what would happen, and here I am. I have also seen people who applied later than I did, but a position just happened to open up, and because of their passion and willingness to give it a chance and apply, they are on the road now as well! Never assume that you won’t be accepted, or that it is too late, or that you’re not qualified, because you never know until you apply!