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My UCDC Experience: A Conduit for A Life of Public Service

Spending the spring semester of my final year at Cal in Washington DC was a very transformative experience.

As I began my internship at the D.C Prisoners' Project of the Washington Lawyers' Committee, the issue of injustice within the American prison system was one that I was hardly exposed to. As a political economy student, I thought I was pretty familiar with the forms of injustice that exist in our country. Unfortunately, the issue of prisoners' rights is widely ignored by most of our society, although it is not necessarily a willful ignorance. These problems exist in the far corners of our peripheral vision and in a side of the world that many of us have no connection to. How are we to acknowledge this major breach in civil rights if we do not have family members and loved ones behind bars to tell us about it?

Working at the Washington Lawyers' Committee brought me face-to-face with the harsh reality of life behind bars. Letter after letter, phone call after phone call, my heart was broken hearing about the horrific acts happening behind prison walls: grossly inadequate medical care; abusive staff members; and a general culture of neglect. Some days I could not stomach it, and that always felt selfish because someone out there was actually living and enduring it.

Every time I contacted the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) seeking answers and help for our clients who had been gravely mistreated, I was only met with bureaucratic red tape. I was hard pressed to find any BOP employee who was willing to help me to assist the very people they were responsible for. I was repeatedly shocked and disappointed that this federal entity was shirking such a major responsibility. I thus realized that the majority of our prison system suffers from a severe lack of civility and democratic engagement, which unfortunately leads to the "criminogenic effect of the prison system." Thankfully, the advocacy and litigation tirelessly pursued by organizations like the D.C. Prisoners' Project help cut through the red tape and bring more public awareness of the realities of prison conditions.

I was also honored to be the first intern of the Center for Public Policy Alternatives (CPPA), a Nigerian-based think-tank seeking to establish a presence in Washington, D.C. With minimal supervision, I was tasked with writing policy dialogues, opinion pieces and attending African-related events across the greater Washington D.C. area. I was privileged to attend meetings at the World Bank, the Robert F Kennedy Center, the Johns Hopkins University School of International Affairs and the U.S House of Representatives. As I listened to each presentation and sub-committee hearings on issues related to the African continent, I experienced first hand the importance of civility and democratic engagement. I noticed one undeniable fact about development in the region:

for sustainable, inclusive and equitable development to occur in any part of the world, civility and democratic engagement between every party involved are essential.

My passion for public service also led me to write my thesis paper on “Renewable Energy for Rural Electrification and Development in Africa.” As a political economy student, I have been bombarded with countless factors that continue to plague the developing world. Therefore, I decided to focus on solving energy poverty as a tool for sustainable development in these regions. My research prospectus received a lot of positive feedback, and I was honored to receive an invitation from Princeton University to participate in their summer research program (which of course I duly accepted!).

My experience in D.C. was one of hard work but also of immense fun and relaxation. I took the opportunity to explore the beautiful and rich culture of the Washington, Maryland and Virginia area. I made life-long friendships, played childishly in the snow, did a lot of dancing (as my form of exercise), and utterly enjoyed both the responsibility and freedom that the UCDC experience offered.

I never knew that these opportunities would have been possible for me. I thank God for fellowships such as the CCDE for ensuring that financial limitations did not prevent people like me from exploring spaces where I could not only pursue my dreams but also be available to serve people and improve myself. My unique and multifaceted UCDC experience has plunged me into a life of public service, where I hope to imbibe a culture of civility and democratic engagement to serve and alleviate issues affecting under-represented members of our society.