

I was not looking forward to my senior youth group's commitment to help reorganize storage space at a battered women's shelter in nearby Trenton. In fact, I was dreading it. Growing up in a quiet college town, I had been sheltered from the stark hardships many people face on a daily basis, and I knew this experience would expose me to a reality I had never known. I found myself standing in a room with bars on the windows and crowded with women and children. No one was smiling, but I was happy to be there. The women I met at that shelter tugged at my heart. I knew from that first day that I wanted not only to help people, but to influence the world's perspective on women. Although this seemed like a tangible idea at the time, life seemed to get in the way, and my youthful dream faded into the background.

Several courses at the University of Wisconsin re-awakened that dream. As a Human Development and Family Studies major with a minor in Women's Studies, I learned about women's bodies and gender-specific diseases. I learned that comprehensive sex education is one of the most important lessons to teach in secondary schools. I learned that even in the 21st Century, women still needed to be empowered. During class one day, I thought about one young mother I met in the shelter. I wondered if she had ever learned to protect herself from pregnancy, rape, sexual violence and abuse? I wondered if her education had ever included these things. *I wondered quietly if I could change her reality.*

That afternoon I decided to volunteer with Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin. After working for about three weeks, I knew that this was the spark missing from my college years. I love talking with people about their experiences at the agency, hearing

their stories about attending marches and rallies in Washington D.C., and how Planned Parenthood changed their lives. I felt as if I had gained a family, so far away from my real one in Princeton. Soon I found myself sitting in yet another lecture hall, discussing Family Perspectives in Policy Making. I usually dreaded these required policy courses, but, to my surprise, I actually enjoyed this one; we learned things that were applicable to real life. I decided to focus on a policy to incorporate comprehensive sex education into our schools, while staying mindful that abstinence is 100% affective. The project was all-consuming. I found myself watching religious-based films that promoted abstinence before marriage and tuning into the nightly news for updated information on birth control legislation. *Something had stirred within me and I began to see ways I could help.*

The next summer I applied for an internship position with the Wisconsin Alliance for Women's Health (WAWH). Not only did I bring my knowledge of women's health issues to the interview, I brought my sex education policy paper, as well, hoping that the director would see that I truly cared about political issues related to women. To my astonishment, I was hired as the lead intern for the summer. I got right to work researching and compiling the first *Wisconsin Women's Health Guide*, a directory of all the services each county provides for women in the state. As a representative to WAWH, I was invited to attend a *SisterSong* conference in Green Bay to listen to women talk about reproductive justice and hear their own personal testimonies. It was my first taste of advocacy work – how one person can effectively serve a large group of people. *Now I knew I was helping.*

Halfway through the summer internship with WAWH, I was asked by Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin to be the election manager intern for the summer and fall

semester, leading up to the 2006 mid-term elections in November. The work included helping to advocate for a pro-choice governor, leading election phone banks to gain voter support, and manage nearly 100 volunteers. I did not hesitate for a minute. Women and families were groups I could represent passionately, and what better way than to help re-elect a governor whose values about social policy work I shared. The transition from direct service to women's health policies was seamless. Though I missed being able to serve women and families with information and resources such as the *Wisconsin Women's Health Guide*, I knew that my first-hand experiences would make my election internship all the more meaningful.

I was able to handle the pressure of working under a deadline, recruiting and managing volunteers, and devising new ways to promote and thank our workers, but I was surprised about the lack of passion I felt for the work, but seeing the fire my co-workers had for this election and its issues, I jumped head first into the election. For the first time I realized that if we didn't win the election, not only would I be directly affected myself by a new governor who did not support a woman's right to choose (and thought birth control should be taken out of university pharmacies), but every single woman in Wisconsin would also be affected. I began paying attention to the polls, talking to my friends about the importance of the re-election, and for the first time, considering the opposition's point of view. *I was finally feeling the fire.*

The week leading up to the election was full of sleepless nights and intense emotion. I shared my co-worker's and supervisor's passion. Most mornings, I was up before class, canvassing for women's health issues, advocating for the Governor and trying not to think of the "what ifs." The whirlwind election journey mirrored my own

journey and enabled me to fully understand why I want to be a social worker who advocates for the rights of women.

Looking back on that experience, the passion and excitement I felt -- knowing I was genuinely serving thousands of women in Wisconsin who should have the right to control their own bodies, and have access to the type of birth control they need to regulate their reproduction -- was overwhelming. Governor Doyle won re-election. I can't help but think that my small part, the part of me that wanted to help an under-served population -- women who couldn't speak for themselves but still deserved to be heard in the state of Wisconsin -- actually did make a difference in the outcome of this election.