CAITLIN PRESCOTT

SUMMER 2026

LIA REPORT: URBAN RIVERS

My LiA was based in Chicago where I worked with Urban Rivers - a non-profit that has a longstanding relationship with the Laidlaw scholarship programme - to help in their efforts to create urban sanctuaries on Chicago's waterways. My initial interest in the project came from two distinct areas that this organisation wonderfully overlapped: American local government and blue space. Though a slightly odd combination, these two areas blended together well and allowed me to have the most enjoyable summer of my life.

My Role

The role that I played within the organisation could be split into the two distinct strands: daily operations support and research on wider barriers to the non-profit. Specifically, I wanted to use the project to gain a better understanding of how a non-profit operates in modern, corporate America and what barriers that it faces. Very few people openly oppose a floating eco-park and a drive to get more people on the Chicago riverside, and yet there are many hoops and obstacles that Urban Rivers has to navigate in order to maintain service and expand the park. Understanding why these arise and the different relationships and permits needed to mitigate these barriers was a really interesting process that will no doubt help me beyond my work with Urban Rivers.

Most of my time was spent supporting the daily tasks associated with keeping a floating eco-park running and visitors entertained. This proved to be a brilliant way to explore the inner workings of a non-profit.

My Goals

FACILITATE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

I spent the majority of my time at Urban Rivers supporting day-to-day operations, the bulk of which involved around engaging local communities in visits and education. I facilitated field trips by leading litter counts for high schoolers and plant bingo for middle schoolers. I led kayaking sessions and tours in community events at Bubbly Creek where we specifically targeted communities currently underserved by environment outreach. My fellow intern Sara organised a Bat Walk that I then helped her lead; in preparation, I created informational material on both bats and the West Nile virus outbreak as well as learning to operate the bat-identifying equipment.

CORPORATE RELATIONS

Despite my summer being based in a non-profit, I was still interacting with corporations. I helped lead corporate training days whilst also helping Urban River's work to retrieve hire bikes and scooters from the river. This taught me about the symbiotic relationship of corporations and non-profits; rather than existing in opposition, it is donations and commissions from corporate America that help facilitate this river work.



ZONING & PERMITTING

Not to dissimilar from my research focus last summer, I also endeavoured to use my time in the US to understand the local government and zoning system better. Urban Rivers was a really unique place to explore this because it has to navigate both land and waterway permits. I wrote my own proposal on based on a future zoning scenario, and in doing so, gained a deep understanding of the Chicago aldermanic and city government system.

Reflection

My summer in Chicago was undoubtedly one of the most impactful experiences that I have ever had for a multitude of reasons. It opened my eyes to life in the US, especially Chicago, which is such an alive and exciting city, that I may want to pursue one day. This is in no small part because I had such a wonderful host and would encourage any future LIA participant to live with someone to help the adjustment. It has also opened my eyes to working in policy and a non-profit; I have built skills applicable to that workplace whilst realising that I enjoy that environment.

I found myself to be so happy in Chicago. I got up every morning to explore the city and spent every evening trying something new. It's made me less scared to be an adult, to move out and live abroad. I did a lot of growing up in Chicago and have truly fallen in love with the people, city and, of course, the river.

