Liliana Quiroga

Laidlaw Leadership In Action Project: Disability Rights International

Washington, D.C., is one of the primary hubs for disability rights organizations. D.C. hosts both national and international advocacy groups. As the national policy hub, Washington, D.C., was a place I was eager to experience. Disability Rights International immediately caught my eye. Founder and executive director of Disability Rights International, Eric Rosenthal, was a great support to my interest. He worked effectively to find me a location where I could work and contribute. Initially, Mexico City was the planned location, but after the office closed, I was transferred to the Washington, D.C., office.

I hopped onto the bus to make my way over to my first day of work. I was eager to get to the building. The first building I entered was the wrong one. The second building I entered was wrong. Finally, the third building was right where I was supposed to be. After entering the first building, I waited in the lobby with fellow undergraduate interns. These students were also working at Georgetown Law School's O'Neil Center. Their work was centered around criminal justice. Many of these students had worked for criminal justice organizations their previous summers. Although I met them because of my lack of directional skills, it was fantastic to come across such passionate individuals. I saw many of them throughout the summer.

My first few days of work revolved around familiarizing myself with Disability Rights International's current and past cases. I spent the first week reading 500 pages of legal cases. I familiarized myself with 3 cases DRI is working on in Mexico, Colombia, and Guatemala. I had a few meetings with my supervisor while completing my readings. I struggled at the beginning. My work regarding disability rights always mentioned legal cases, but it was often only my job to understand the summary and its social impact. Now I was challenged to truly understand legal

analysis, understand laws and codes, and apply this knowledge to collect data on related violations across cases. I applied standards and jurisprudence relevant to the case. Immediately, I noticed time. Time is precious. Legal advocacy and investigations take time. Advocacy organizations are constantly working against the clock. It takes years for cases to be written, investigated, read, and advanced to further courts. DRI has worked on some cases for over 10 years as they continue to advance in international legal processes.

Through this cross-case analysis, I began to recognize the patterns of inequality disabled people face. I saw the ways the state failed to intervene to protect disabled people. DRI investigates these disparities and brings them to light, not only in court but to the general public. As DRI emphasizes, there are over one billion people with disabilities, and many of them are segregated from society. I was tasked with looking at the segregation of people with disabilities through the use of abusive institutions. These institutions do little to no work to integrate people with disabilities into society. Instead, they place them into violent, impoverished, and worn-down institutions. Many of these individuals are forced into such institutions, even against the wishes of caretakers and family members.

I began by working to best understand the case regarding Colombia. This is one of the newer cases that DRI is working on. I used previous cases and presented violations through the Organization of American States' American Convention on Human Rights (ACHR Treaty). This treaty protects political and civil rights for people living in the Americas. To start the process, I read the two previous cases that used ACHR to present violations: Mexico and Guatemala. After completing my readings and note-taking, I began compiling the violations. For example, I would read an article such as Article 5. Restraints and Isolation. Then, I would see which information presented in the case could possibly violate the article and analyze the violation in comparison to

previous cases. Then, I looked at the Colombia case. This is where I completed most of my analysis. I reviewed the case and applied violations to the articles. The case had not yet had ACHR violations incorporated into its writing, as it was still in the drafting process. Thus, I was able to apply violations directly to the legal analysis and writing to further the work being done on the case. Throughout this process, I attended meetings with a lawyer from Incidencia ALCE (Abolition of Logics of Punishment and Confinement), an advocacy team dedicated to deinstitutionalization through legal advocacy. Incidencia ALCE began as a grassroots initiative in Colombia started by survivors of psychiatric institutions and people involved in disability rights work. My analysis and work centered on a broader international treaty. The violations would directly apply under the American Convention on Human Rights. The lawyer with Incidencia ALCE examined violations under Colombian law, using a legal framework to understand how the case is represented under Colombian law. Their work was essential to seeing how the Colombian state violated and failed to protect the rights of the individual in the case. Working with the lawyer provided our team with further knowledge about how psychiatric institutions operate in Colombia. Before this. DRI conducted its own investigation into the abuses committed against the individual by the state and the institution, but a longer, hands-on understanding of the regional relationship and law is crucial to building the strongest case possible. Most importantly, it helps provide the most urgent assessment and support for individuals at risk. Cases take a long time to move through; while waiting, it is vital that local lawyers provide advocacy and navigate domestic laws.

Throughout this entire process, I familiarized myself with current disability rights protections. Further, I began to notice how disabled individuals are segregated from society in institutions that do not support them, instead often causing trauma, regression, and emotional

turmoil. These institutions exist because many countries, cultures, and societies do not understand disabilities and do not understand what it means ot include disabled people in life. By placing people with disabilities into institutions, they are no longer able to participate in society. Their needs are seen as beyond integratable. Thus, these institutions often do not even try to integrate them by providing necessary support or skills to eventually leave the psychiatric institution.

The cases I was reading and assisting with were quite emotional, and I found them to be emotionally taxing. To help myself find a balance, I prioritized exploring the city after leaving the office. As a public transportation enthusiast, I was eager to figure out how to navigate the D.C. metro and bus system. Their trains have fantastic air conditioning, and many of the stations didn't feel like a sauna (sorry, New York City). Public transportation helped me search and wander around Washington, D.C. as much as my heart desired. Working in Washington, D.C. gave me the opportunity to explore my interest in history and policy. As a history major, I found myself visiting at least 2 museums every week. The Smithsonian museums are wonderful places to pass the time! I was a big fan of their free admission and the shade they provided from Virginia's hot, humid summers. Throughout my time visiting countless museums, I found myself wondering where disability rights history fit in the picture. Often, disability rights was a brief side note on placards. It was fascinating to observe the progression of a nation, whether this was through portrait artwork, Black American history, postal advancements, or Indigenous history. I enjoyed speaking to staff members and asking questions about their interest in history. In fact, my favorite conversation occurred at the National Portrait Gallery; I had previously visited the National Portrait Gallery in London. I spoke with a lovely staff member about England and America's great novelists and their corresponding portraits, and we discussed how they differ in

style. I am no art history expert myself, but I learned a lot from that conversation and from my multiple visits to art galleries while in D.C.

While in D.C., my home base was at George Washington University in the historic Foggy Bottom neighborhood. I lived just a few blocks from the White House and the National Mall. George Washington University's urban campus is a great place for those who enjoy being around many people and city energy. In fact, over my 6-week stay, I made a close friendship with a George Washington University student. Being a Laidlaw scholar has introduced me to so many valuable colleagues and friends. My new friend visited countless museums with me and shared so many restaurant and cafe recommendations. I always love making friends with locals while traveling or visiting somewhere. It was a lively summer to work in Washington, D.C.; the World Cup was played at the National Mall and across the city. The 250th anniversary of the United States also drew many visitors to the city on the Fourth of July. It was much too hot to fully enjoy. All activities were canceled, and lightning and thunder delayed the fireworks.

I spent the last two weeks of my internship revising my analysis of violations, adding footnotes and checking formatting. I also spent the time on my last project, the Citizen Data Project. This task required me to look at manuals from many sources and regions. More specifically, I looked at how manuals discuss monitoring individuals with disabilities. Sources like these are informative and useful for future disability rights conversations. I reviewed manuals or instructions on monitoring institutions for people with disabilities or other places of detention that might include children or adults with disabilities. I also did my best to find reasons why certain rules or protocols are included or omitted from manuals. I investigated who the manuals were meant for and who wrote them. Is the goal of monitoring to end torture, improve

conditions, or equip the public with information needed to decide on policies related to institutionalization? What has been done with the findings?

Working with Disability Rights International was an incredibly rewarding and illuminating experience. My passion for disability rights is deeply personal and began with growing up alongside my autistic brother. My time with DRI allowed me to build on that passion while deepening my understanding of the legal, ethical, and human dimensions of disability rights advocacy. I was especially grateful for the opportunity to learn from such intelligent and dedicated advocates and to expand my understanding of disability rights from the domestic to the international level.

Thank you, Eric Rosenthal and Priscila Rodriguez, for your mentorship, guidance, and for welcoming me onto your team. I am grateful for the opportunity to learn from such dedicated advocates and to contribute, even in a small way, to DRI's important mission. I am also deeply grateful to the Laidlaw Foundation for investing in and fully funding my passion for disability rights.