

## LSDI 2012: Finding Self-Worth, Being Grounded in Conviction

“Welcome to NOW. I’m Allendra, and I will be your supervisor this summer. Tell me a little about yourself.”

With a strong Southern accent recently reawakened by a few summer weeks at home in rural Mississippi, I responded, “Hey, Allendra. I’m Hanna, and I go to school in Tennessee at a small, private liberal arts university. Next year, I will be a co-director of my university’s Women’s Center, which is a controversial position since our school is pretty conservative.”

“So, you are from Tennessee?” Allendra asked, cocking her head to the side.

“No, I’m from Mississippi.”

Her eyebrows raised. I had been getting that reaction a lot in DC, but I hadn't thought much about it. But, suddenly, I was made hyper-aware of my accent, my long hair, my make up, and my matching outfit. As the day wore on, I felt that, physically, I represented what I came from: an oppressive environment that is known globally for being backward and for objectifying women to beauty pageants and debutante balls.

For the remainder of my first day, as I walked through the office meeting all of the NOW employees, NOW officers, and my fellow interns, I felt self-conscious. I felt like every time I opened my mouth and spoke with my sickly-sweet drawl and smiled and said, “It’s really great to meet you,” I was offering evidence to be doubted. I was objectifying *myself* and disappointing feminists everywhere.

Never had I been so ashamed of my roots. While I have traveled to many major US and world cities, I had never before felt like I needed to prove anything to any group of people. For a reason that I could not identify on my first day at NOW, in an office of women who represent all of the successes that I believe in, I felt marginalized and disempowered.

My first week at the National Organization for Women was the most challenging week of work that I experienced. None of my tasks were particularly *demanding*; it’s not that I felt inept due to high expectations. The case was actually much the opposite. All of my tasks were too easy. I couldn't handle it. I wanted more. I felt like my supervisor Allendra didn't believe in me--and that perhaps she was as ashamed of my Southern roots as I was beginning to feel. I thought that she judged my Southernness as a handicap and that she was giving me easy tasks because that was all I could handle. I didn't realize the simple truth: Allendra was trying not to overwhelm me during my first week, and she was trying to understand my working style so that she could help me to grow as an intern.

Since I was the Conference intern, during the first three weeks of my six-week internship, I was assigned tasks like making table tents for exhibitors, typing biographies for speakers, and editing the program book. Most assignments I was given did encourage independent thinking and problem solving skills, especially when the Conference took place, and I was my supervisor's go-to for getting tasks done quickly. While I understood when I began the internship that my starting work three weeks

before the Conference meant that I would be helping to tie up last-minute loose ends (like making name badges and creating signs for a complementary Saturday morning yoga class), my first week of work seemed mockingly simple. Again, my perspective was shrouded by an ever-present, untouchable self-consciousness that I couldn't grasp and get rid of--and it was persuading me to confuse my assumptions for reality.

In the meantime, as I struggled with my own perceptions, I watched Allendra and took note on how she functioned in the office. Fortunately, although I felt like I embarrassed her, Allendra offered a great example as to how establish a positive work environment. She really listened to people and never interrupted when others were speaking. She often rephrased what her colleagues shared, and if she thought an idea could use constructive criticism, she would kindly reroute the plan to a more productive or effective model. Allendra always complimented a job well-done. She never let anyone feel overwhelmed. She encouraged a healthy life-work balance and helped everyone around her to prioritize personal stability over efficiency.

While I stapled papers during my second day and organized office supplies the next, I took note of Allendra's skills and thought about how to implement them at Sewanee and beyond. I was confused how such a kind, intelligent leader could doubt me, and my self-confidence further dwindled.

Conference week started, and everyone in the office was stressing over the printer, adding edits to the program book addendum, or collecting last-minute materials. The office was energetic, and Allendra maintained her ability to keep stresses at a minimum while completing difficult, time-sensitive tasks. I was still feeling out of place in DC and in the office, but at the very least, during those hectic days before the Conference, I felt useful and needed. Then, the Conference happened.

From organizing the Conference office, to taking care of a special Conference member who was disabled, to leading the other interns in tasks, I was being taken seriously. People were listening to me. I felt respected, and no longer was I haunted by the ghosts of feeling underworked, underwhelmed, underestimated, or unfulfilled.

Somewhere among the high stresses, the last-minute tasks that I tackled, the overall air of women's empowerment, and the cohesion that such events bring among a group of people, I finally found my footing. At one point, I looked around myself. Nothing had changed. My supervisor was the same person. My co-interns were all the same. The Conference members were just as high-energy (and somewhat demanding) as ever. The change that took place was intrinsic, but feeling needed and productive was what made me realize that I am pertinent. I am skilled. I am able. And most of all, I am enough.

In the weeks following the Conference, Allendra began to rely on me more and more. She told me that I was great at catching small details and finishing tasks effectively without much direction. At first, I was reluctant to believe that. I'd never imagined that I was sensitive to details or strong with following through. But, after I paid more attention to how I was working, I realized that she was right. Moreover, I

found that I am particularly good at offering balance. Whereas Allendra often got so busy that she could not mind the details or finish all of her tasks, I could offer that balance to her in order to complement her work style.

Capitalizing on this newly-realized skill, my favorite project that I worked on in my last weeks was writing a curriculum to complement an already-existing NOW project called "Love Your Body." I worked on adding a component titled "Love Your Color," which will be a program that encourages awareness in young women and girls of how color is treated in the media and how media-defined standards of beauty are unfair and unrealistic. To begin writing "Love Your Color," I examined how the popular media often employs lighter skinned women of color to play in movies or to be featured in magazine ads, and I saw how the media broadcasts Euro-centric features as the gold-standard of physical appearance.

While I worked on the very first drafts of this new curriculum, the reason for my earlier grief struck me. As a white woman, I was not taken off guard by the fact that color and race can put people at terrible, undeserved disadvantages. I have studied race before--but until this summer, I had never examined being *white*. Being white--being someone who naturally upholds the light-skinned preference--made me feel guilty. And then it started to sink in. I knew why I had been so self-conscious in the early weeks of my internship: I had yet to accept my own unchosen circumstance or to accept my own unchosen privilege.

I am white. I am tall. I am slender. I have a conventional look, and I wear outfits that are well-thought out because my culture tells me that's how you respect others and yourself. I like my hair long, and I like to color it because it is expressive. I like my teeth and my smile. I like painting my fingernails because I don't like blank, empty spaces.

On the contrary, I don't shave my legs because I don't think it's worth the time. I don't workout to stay thin because I can concentrate my energy in more productive ways. When I was younger, my family couldn't afford braces. There is an art to walking in high heels that I will never master. I am simply not good at keeping a "feminine air" about myself.

Before interning at NOW, I had never really contemplated *why* I am the way I am, although I knew *how* I was. Today, I better understand that there are some things about my appearance that I can't help, and what I can, I should choose with care and purpose. Without experience, all of the theorizing I had once done to explain myself was frivolous. At NOW, I found experience, conviction, and grounding. I accepted that there is a part of me that betrays where I come from, but I don't want to change that about myself. I believe in myself, and I believe in who and what I come from.

I also realized that there is another side to loving myself--and that's accepting this conventional look that I didn't choose and accepting my own privilege. No one should feel guilty about how she simply is, nor what she comes from. And I'm a part of that rule, too.

Finally, I came to terms with the friction that will always persist between who I am and where I'm going. While I don't completely fit in at home because of my "radical"

hopes for women's rights, I certainly am a Southerner, and therefore, other regions of the US can't make me theirs. In most places, there is a part of me that will feel like a fish out of water, but if I can keep a finger in this part of the story--the part where I come to terms with and find peace in who I am on the outside and in--then I can maintain my self-worth, and only empowerment will unfurl from there.