



## **Our Part in Change**

*A Youth Perspective on interning at the Children's Defense Fund*

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When I began my summer internship at the Children's Defense Fund, I held the somewhat naïve view that shaping policy was simply a matter of passion about the issues, independent excellence, and a specific goal. I felt ready to dive into the advocacy world: passion – I have always had; individual excellence – I thought could be gained with time and experience; a specific goal in mind – well, that is what I came to CDF to discover. After eight weeks of interaction with the CDF staff, participation in advocacy coalition meetings, and conversations with accomplished advocates for whom I have great respect, I have come to the realization that passion, individual excellence, and specific goals are essential but not sufficient catalysts to change. As I go forward in hopes of chipping away at the block that is “the system”, I take with me a few lessons that I believe can also guide young people as we attempt to impact the communities to which we belong.

Most of us feel some degree of passion about disheartening issues; whether we read unsettling articles in the daily news, or the harsh injustices of society are the reality we are faced with everyday. When we encounter these upsetting issues, we often sigh with discontentment, or perhaps vocalize our exasperation to the person sitting next to us. After a few moments of frustration about the way things are, the great majority of us simply continue our lives unchanged, convinced that there is nothing we can do to fight the problems around us. One press conference I attended with a CDF staff member taught me that in order to make passion a useful tool, it must be paired with a willingness to take action. At the conference, I was overwhelmed by the speeches of several young girls who spoke in support of legislation that would help commercially exploited teenagers receive rehabilitation instead of punishment. Three days later, the bill passed in the Senate. I realize that when the passion of young people culminates in action, the possibilities for change are endless. Thus, as young people hoping for positive change in our communities, we must fully exercise our rights as citizens by making our voices heard – whether by a simple phone call to our representatives, or a peaceful demonstration of our stance.

Individual expertise is essential in the movement towards change; when we become skilled individuals, we are better equipped to help ourselves and those around us. However, interning at CDF helped me realize that independent excellence is only a small part of effective advocacy. This was best exemplified to me in a discussion I had at CDF concerning the dismantling of “Cradle to Prison Pipeline” – a crisis that predominantly affects black males. Addressing this multifaceted issue requires that a focus on poverty, juvenile justice, healthcare, education, and racial disparities. Because none of these problems exist in isolation of another, they cannot be addressed by someone with excellence in only one; team effort becomes a necessity – not only among CDF staff, but among all people striving to achieve the same ends. Understanding the complexity of injustices so deeply embedded in our society has not rid me of my optimism in the daunting pursuit of change; rather, it has helped me further value communication, collaboration, and partnership as the only means to achieving it. As young people, I believe that we can receive optimal results when we combine individual expertise with team effort.

Due to the sheer volume of issues that CDF tackles daily, I have come to realize the importance of naming specific goals – whether it is defining a legislative agenda or conducting a short-term initiative. However, my experience this summer had taught me that goals are only as good as the concrete

strategies that are set to achieve them. As a CDF attendee of the Student Safety Coalition meetings where we worked towards the passage of the Student Safety Act, I had the privilege of witnessing firsthand the strategy-devising process – from compiling useful data espousing the bill to gaining support from lawmakers. The meticulous approach of the coalition members in pursuing this act was as time-consuming and “non-glamorous” as it was inspiring. Young people must follow this example as we strive to make our voices heard in public forums; we must pair our goals for change with methodical strategies through which we can fulfill them.

Even armed with the knowledge my CDF internship has given me about passion and action, individual expertise and team effort, and specific goals and concrete strategies, my youthful impatience often begs the question, *how soon will we see real change?* In the non-profit world, people often speak of changing “the system” that constantly dispels injustice. The most important lesson I have learned as CDF intern is that it is not an insurmountable task to change “the system”, because there is no system in place – there are just people who make up society’s institutions. There are people who are willing to forgo child health and wellbeing in the pursuit of other agendas, and there are people who think that the only way to correct children is to punish them. There are people who consciously refuse to let go of their discriminatory views about others, and there are people who remain perpetually ignorant of the paradigms that inform their everyday decisions. There are people who are ambivalent towards change. Yet, these are still people, as am I. When I think of it this way, I realize that you and I – as young people – have the power to alter the fabric of our society if only we mobilize ourselves, friends, parents, and teachers, to hold these system-makers accountable for their decisions. By ensuring that our public institutions operate with public accountability, we become our own advocates –drivers in the movement towards positive change.