CITIZENS ALLIANCE FOR NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS

Faith Garcia, 2018, Seoul, South Korea
A Typical Office Day

As an intern for Citizen’s Alliance, we usually worked from 10:30-5 with an hour long lunch break with the other interns. Our supervisors gave us tasks ranging from editing documents (in Korean and English), working on the organization’s website, conducting interviews, and typical office work.

Sometimes we were assigned specific duties but most often they would give a job to the interns as a whole and we would decide how to split up the work amongst ourselves.
Our First Day

The first few days were spent familiarizing ourselves with the history and goals of Citizen’s Alliance.

We read mission statements, looked through testimonies by North Korean defectors, read UN reports on North Korean human rights violations, etc.
Most Rewarding Experience

On my last day of work we went as a large group to tour a racetrack located near the outskirts of Seoul. There we met with and interviewed a young North Korean man who owned and operated a food truck.

He spoke about his life growing up in North Korea, about his dangerous defection from the North to the South, and about prejudices and deficiencies he’s had to overcome as a North Korean man trying to start his own business in South Korea.

Listening to his story was really touching and I think it really helped me begin to understand the strength it must take to abandon your whole life without any sort of assurance that what’s waiting on the other side is better.
Conferences

We had the opportunity to attend a few conferences throughout the summer, which were extremely exciting and informative.

This particular conference focused on the aftermath of reunification between the two countries. Who should be held accountable for the human rights violations that are occurring/have occurred under the Kim regime?
A Lasting Impact

We had the opportunity to work on some truly lasting things this summer. The first thing that comes to mind is that right from the start we worked to move over 20 years worth of information from an old website to a new one that is more easily accessible to the general public.

We created a video to raise awareness on forced abductions of South Korean citizen’s by North Korean soldiers, and we edited and arranged a photobook that summarizes the work Citizen’s Alliance has been doing since their founding.
Intern Fun

The office started out with just three interns but by the time I left there were eight of us.

We did what’s known as Hweshik (회식), which is a Korean cultural tradition intending to foster team-building and comradery among coworkers.

We all went out together to eat Korean BBQ, share drinks, and go to a Korean Noraebang (노래방) for karaoke.
Lessons Learned

I am a Junior in the East Asian Studies department with a focus on Korean culture and language, but this was my first time actually visiting Korea. I loved the city, the food (yum), and the culture and am excited to return.

I have always had a sort of casual interest in North Korean human rights issues, but my work here this summer has really opened my eyes to violations that I had no idea were happening.

Moving forward from here I hope to continue researching and learning about North Korea, reunification hopes, and the issues the people face.
Saying Goodbye

A couple of the other interns and I are posed here with the logo for Citizen’s Alliance on our last day.
How Korea Has Impacted Me

My summer in Seoul was the first time I’ve ever gone abroad alone, lived alone, and basically built a life for myself in a place where I don’t know anybody and can’t even speak the language fluently. Honestly, it was hard at first but by the end I was devastated about having to leave.

I met such wonderful people in Korea, started learning Muay Thai (kickboxing) and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, worked with an organization that devotes so much time to helping North Korean resettlers, and learned that I’m capable of going out to a new city or a new country and actually making a life for myself (which was a relief).

I’m glad I had such a positive experience in Seoul because it has made me more excited for future travel, both alone and with others.