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Rachael Wyant: Seeking Deliverables

During Rachael Wyant's first job out of Boston University in 2009, she discovered an unsettling paradox in her work as a refugee resettlement case manager in New York City: the profound gratification of connecting with people in need, juxtaposed with the heartbreaking reality of having precious little ability to find long-term solutions for them.

The job was with the International Rescue Committee, and it involved helping provide such necessities as food stamps, jobs and housing to refugees from the likes of Tibet and Liberia, all the while recognizing that impoverished Americans were competing for the same services.

"I loved talking to families and getting to know people, but I didn't feel like I was making a difference," she said. "I wanted to be in a position where I wasn't just a social worker, but where I could work on some of the bigger, systemic issues."

It was a formative experience for Rachael, now a second-year student at Northeastern School of Law, both in terms of recognizing a passion for policy-level work and understanding that she cared too much to compromise.

There has been plenty of similar self-discovery packed into her 33 years.

She had become passionate about international development during a four-country "Rethinking Globalization" trip while an undergrad, so she entered the International Affairs master's program at The New School (Class of 2013) in New York, always maintaining a job throughout her schooling.

Jobs with women's rights organizations were fulfilling, but Rachael was becoming disillusioned with international power dynamics. "After being committed to this idea of doing international work for my whole life," she said, "I was beginning to care more about domestic issues."

So she became a project manager at Race Forward, helping cities and states train employees around racial equity, and she applied to law schools.

Northeastern Law led her to the Rappaport Fellowship and "a perfect first internship," she said. It provided 11 weeks of experience working within government, candid conversations with such high-profile public servants as City Councilor Michelle Wu and District Attorney Rachael Rollins, an internship with State Senator Joan Lovely, and the realization that work within a local official's office likely includes too much compromise for Rachael's comfort.

"The process of whittling down what people want and need tends to dilute the impact," she said. "I understand that that's the reality of a democracy and how things work, but I just want to be on the side of pushing for things I believe in."

She is thrilled, meanwhile, that an extension of the Rappaport program includes a grant-funded research project on constitutional challenges to public health emergency policies in communities as they pertain to re-opening businesses and schools.

"I like producing a deliverable that people can use as advocacy," Rachael said. "I feel like the academic side of myself is going to be fulfilled for the next six months, so I'm really, really happy about that."

— Dave Cummings
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