Opportunities for All placed Intern Akira Chou at the Department on the Status of Women for six weeks spanning August and September. He supported the Department in many ways, from helping with grant invoices, data analysis, internet research, and writing this powerful and creative article on the Forward Fellows Graduation and Presentations Event that took place on August 26, 2020.

“You got this sis!” “We powerful!” Before anyone speaks a word, the Zoom chat floods with messages of encouragement and support. At the Forward Fellows Graduation and Presentations Event, I enter a welcoming and caring community of strong women. Forward Fellows are powerful young leaders, working to shift the narratives and systems that affect the lives of youth impacted by trafficking and/or the underground street economy in San Francisco. Supported by Freedom Forward and the Young Women’s Freedom Center, Fellows pursue a year of healing-centered leadership workshops and develop projects to effect their visions of change.

The event’s host, Ifasina Clear, from Young Women’s Freedom Center, initiates the graduation ceremony by honoring the land and our ancestors. She speaks a few words before welcoming all participants to turn on their mic and voice an ancestor that they are grateful for. Countless names are spoken and Jessica Nowlan, the Executive Director of the Center for Young Women’s Development, states, “your work guides our work and it is beautiful to see everybody’s face.” Alia Whitney-Johnson, the Executive Director of Freedom Forward, also takes the opportunity to convey how emotional she feels to see so many people. Whitney-Johnson started Freedom Forward with an ambitious goal to reduce sexual exploitation within the city of San Francisco. “Today,” she proudly asserts, “I have every confidence that this is just the beginning for each of you.”

Five Forward fellows are graduating today. The diverse group of youth leaders present their projects and thank each other for support. Some become Forward Fellows after surviving human trafficking. Many have family members who were survivors of commercial sexual exploitation. While on the verge of tears, one fellow reveals her trauma and “mentally preparing everyday to be with many men.” She was introduced to sex trafficking when she was 12 years old. “It’s not worth going on a date for money and never coming back” she asserts. By urging others to seek help and to speak up, she ends her presentation. Another fellow’s project was to interview 8 transitional aged youth involved in the sex industry. The fellow explains that people enter the sex industry for a variety of reasons: for financial support, to overcome generational poverty, or for female empowerment. She notes that we often quickly judge trafficking victims and implores us to have empathy. “We need less criminalization of sex workers and increased youth education” she states.

The thought and effort put into these projects is evident. The remaining presentations range from catchy self-composed songs to journal reflections on the transformative year-long fellowship experience. It is inspiring to see each fellow tell her story of hardship and success through different artistic mediums. An all too short Q&A session following the presentations precede the granting of graduation certificates. It’s clear that people aren’t ready for the meeting to end. “Do we really have to go!” shouts one fellow. I leave the ceremony feeling proud for all the determination and bravery that is so clearly ingrained in these five Forward Fellows.