Oddly, out of all the wonderful and powerful experiences I had at the Brown Leadership Institute, the thing that sticks with me the most is a statistic. While I was doing a homework assignment, I discovered that, according to a United Nations report, 1 in 3 women around the world has been beaten, coerced into sex, or abused in her lifetime. 1 in 3. Statistically, this means that roughly seven of the twenty-two girls I had come to know over those two weeks will be attacked, most likely by someone they already know, and most likely by a current or former romantic partner. This is a daunting and terrifying thought, and for the first time I began to consider myself a feminist. Women should not have to live in fear of assault, especially not sexually oriented assault. I feel strongly that I cannot be a passive bystander to this kind of cruelty – that I must do something to help combat violence against women.

For my action plan, I chose to narrow in on domestic violence. Domestic violence is one of the most silent crimes, but it is also one of the most widespread. Women, and occasionally men, in all countries, of all races, and of all socioeconomic backgrounds can be subject to domestic violence. I live in an affluent suburban community, and domestic violence happens in my town. I didn’t fully realize this however until I did extensive research into domestic violence organizations and programs in my state. Initially, I didn’t even think to look for programs in my town, because I blindly assumed that if domestic violence happened where I lived, I would hear about it, and therefore, because I hadn’t heard of any domestic abuse incidents, they must not have been any.

In my research, I stumbled across The Second Step, a nonprofit program in my town that works to combat domestic violence in my community. The Second Step aids women in transitioning away from abuse by providing safety planning, mentoring, transitional housing, advocacy, legal case management, children’s programs, and other supportive services to survivors of domestic violence. I decided my action plan would center around working with this program, so that I could learn about domestic violence at the same time as I was helping break the cycle of abuse. In August, after I got back from Brown, I contacted the office coordinator at The Second Step with the intention of volunteering in the children’s after school program during the school year. By that point however, all of the positions at the children’s center had been filled, so I began to work in the office. For a couple of hours every Tuesday since September, I have been volunteering in the office doing odd jobs.

My position at The Second Step doesn’t really have a title. My job is to assist whoever needs extra help, which I love, because I get to work with almost everyone in the office, and every week I end up doing something new and learning something new. I helped one of the legal case managers, Allison, organize the files for all of her clients. I helped Julia wrap and sort presents for the holiday gift drive this winter. I compiled a list of all the homeless shelters in the Boston area, and another of all the soup kitchens serving Thanksgiving meals. I’ve typed up the minutes of meetings. I helped Lee plan for the Celebrating Success fundraiser. I’ve sent out mailings and spoken to local businesses about putting up flyers to raise awareness of domestic violence and what The Second Step is doing to help stop it. In doing little things,
like copying lesson plans for mentoring groups or having conversations with staff members and caseworkers, I’ve learned how to recognize domestic violence, and how to help a woman remove herself from a dangerous relationship. There are so many complicated aspects to escaping such a situation and I have nothing but respect for the strength of the women who manage to escape. And I have full confidence that with such passionate women as the ones I work with fighting to help those who haven’t yet escaped, there can be a future without domestic abuse.

Working at The Second Step has also taught me incredible attention to detail. Every cabinet and every door in the office must be locked. Every piece of paper with any name or address must be shredded. You can never give out your last name, or anyone else’s when answering a phone call. There’s a doorbell on the front door at the office, and you can never open the door if you don’t know the person behind it. These little details may seem nitpicky, but failure to pay attention to them jeopardizes the safety of all staff member and clients. The utter danger of abusive situations is somewhat overwhelming, but there’s such a sense of satisfaction in doing something as small as shredding a piece of paper. Some of the clients’ abusers will do anything to find them, so it’s absolutely necessary that someone sorts through documents before they are recycled and makes sure nothing puts people in danger. Because The Second Step is a nonprofit, they don’t have the funding to hire someone for little tasks, which often leaves the staff members to do their own shredding or copying or phone answering. Any second I spend shredding paper is a second that a legal case worker can spend helping a woman get a restraining order.

I have also learned the importance of working as a team. The Second Step has taught me that contributing to a movement can be even more important that starting your own. There is no sole leader at The Second Step, all the staff members work for The Second Step because they are passionate and understand that cooperating as a group of leaders is more effective than having only one leader. To be an effective leader, you cannot have personal goals, you must have group goals. One person cannot strive to be the best or to beat out his or her coworkers, because that undermines the mission of the organization. Being a leader requires the ability to cooperate with members of a team. By helping at The Second Step, I have gained a perspective on leadership and what it means to be successful that will be invaluable later in life.

Attending the Symposium on Social Action was an incredible experience. Not only was I able to see friends that I hadn’t seen since summer, but I was encouraged to take my work further. At the symposium, someone gave me the idea of interning with The Second Step. Working with this organization has been an incredible learning experience, and it will continue to be in the future. In addition to weekly office work, I am going to be interning at The Second Step this summer. The office manager and I are creating the internship, just as we created my current position, so we haven’t yet determined exactly what I will be doing, as it is still April.

I am motivated to work with The Second Step by every woman and child I have ever met or known. I feel the need to protect my sister, my cousins, those twenty-two girls from Women and Leadership, my
future children. I remember substituting one evening for a sick staff member at a mentoring group. My job was to take care of two young girls while their moms attended counseling sessions, one of them was one and half years old, and the other was four. These two girls, both of whom had grown up in abusive homes, were entirely trusting and innocent. They laughed and smiled despite the pain they had been through, in spite of the men who had hurt them and their mothers. I have learned that abuse does not define anyone. It shapes people, but it does not define them – both mother and child are capable of new beginnings. I love that I have the opportunity to help create those new beginnings.