

From Hong Kong to Eugene

A Conversation with Anya Petersohn, ELAW Volunteer

By Sam Orwig

In October, Anya Petersohn, 17, boarded a plane from Hong Kong to the U.S. while pro-democracy protests paralyzed much of her home city's financial district. Anya left this historic scene of civil engagement to begin her journey to Eugene, where she will be spending three months working as an intern with the Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide. As the number of protesters in Hong Kong swells, Anya is fighting for human rights on a different front, as an advocate for sound environmental policy and a sustainable future.

Growing up in Hong Kong, Anya loved the outdoors. Treks in Nepal and Tanzania prompted her to reflect on the severe air and water pollution in Hong Kong. She wanted to combat pollution locally and considered working for one of the many environmental consultancies based in Hong Kong, but found herself lost in the bureaucracy of large top-down firms.

This fall, Anya will be a part of a much smaller, yet effective, group of environmental advocates at ELAW. She notes, "ELAW's unique bottom-up approach, focused on building the capacity of environmental lawyers across the globe, is attractive to me. Giving others the tools to affect their own change is a more personable and sustainable approach."

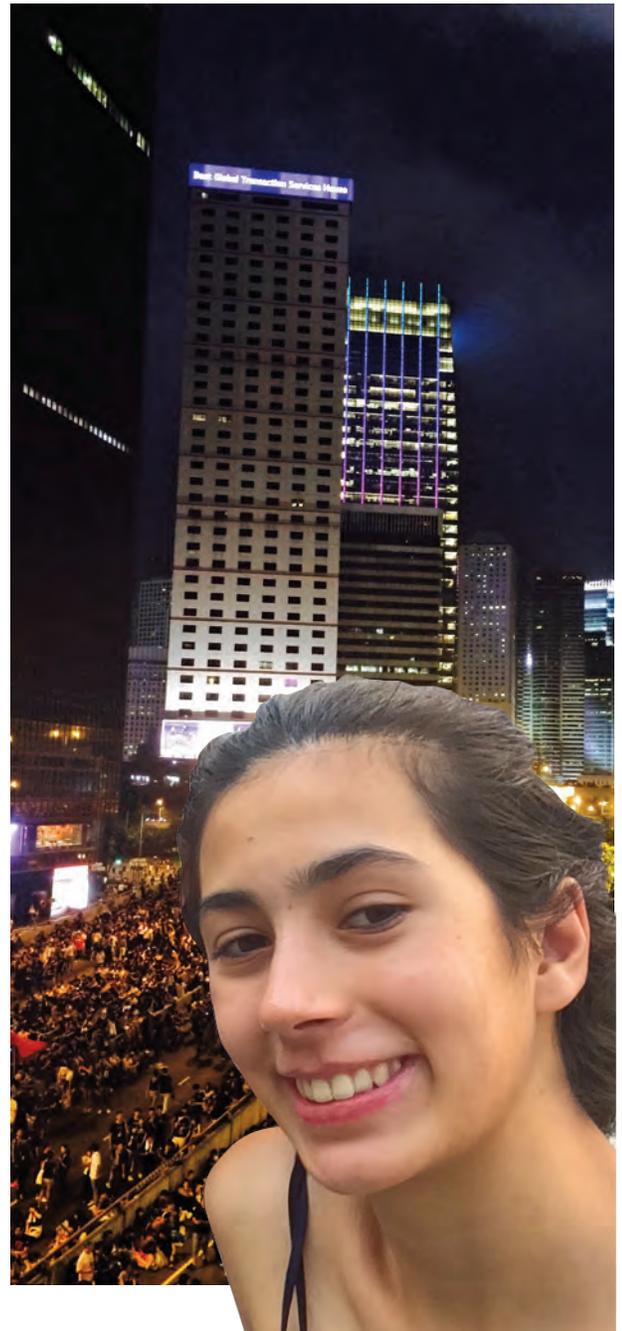
Anya was admitted to Stanford University but will defer until next fall to make time to explore her passion for international development and applied geography while gaining hands-on experience at ELAW.

Hitting the ground running, Anya has already begun work on ELAW's "Defend the Defenders" program, an initiative that protects environmental defenders from harassment, lawsuits, and in some cases, violence. Anya says, "Standing up to powerful interests can be risky. It is important that the safety of environmental lawyers is not an afterthought and that they feel secure throughout the process. An increase in safety will encourage more lawyers to take on the challenge."

Be it protecting ELAW's partners from backlash or peacefully protesting threats to democracy in Hong Kong, Anya believes that change occurs through the mobilization of people, a sentiment welcomed by ELAW.

For more information about the Defend the Defenders program and how you can help, please contact Lori Maddox, ELAW Associate Director, lori@elaw.org. For more information on becoming an ELAW Volunteer, visit ELAW's website (www.elaw.org) and click on "What You Can Do."

Sam Orwig is an ELAW Volunteer. He is a recent graduate of the University of Oregon where he majored in international studies and German. He received a 2014-2015 Baden-Württemberg Scholarship for study at the University of Konstanz, in Germany.



Anya Petersohn