
An American Intern's Notebook

by Josh Bruser

The United States has a long tradition in both the public and private sector of creating internship programmes to allow students to experience what it is like to work in a particular business or profession. These unpaid positions are usually in great demand as participants recognize the incredible experience they gain by spending a few weeks or months as an intern. Senators and Members of the House of Representatives may engage one or more interns. This article outlines the experience of one Senate intern during the summer of 2002.

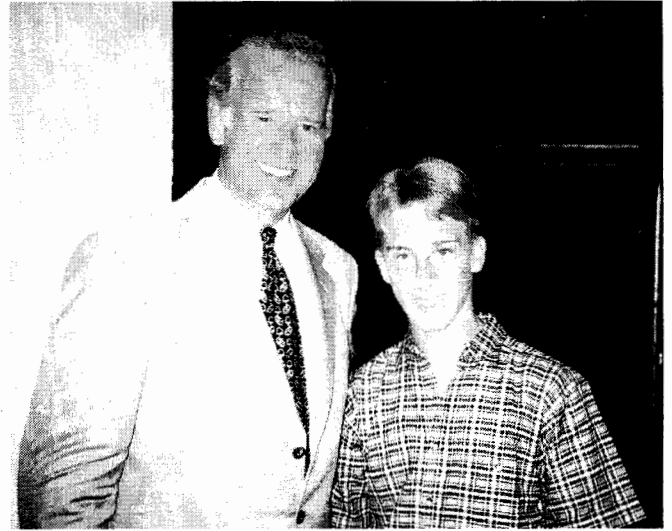
My interest in politics developed quite early and by the time I started high school I began thinking of a possible career in public service. During the winter of 2001 Joseph Biden the Democratic Senator from Delaware was on a speaking tour in California. I went to some of the events and like many others had my photograph taken with him. I decided to write him a letter indicating that I agreed wholeheartedly with the views he had expressed.

I received a very warm letter in response and he invited me to come and see him if I was ever in Washington. He also mentioned the existence of intern opportunities with Senators and Congressmen. I decided to take up his suggestion and sent another letter with a résumé and asked to be considered for an intern position in his office. To my amazement, partly because I was not yet 18 years old and partly because I was from California and not Delaware, I was offered a six week internship.

My family was even more surprised, particularly at the thought of a 17 year old spending six weeks alone in Washington. After many family discussions it was decided this was an opportunity not to be missed so I accepted the offer and during the spring break we took a trip to Washington to look into possible living accommodations. It was decided the best solution would be for the

entire family to rent an apartment in Washington for the six weeks of my internship.

We arrived in Washington on June 20. The temperature was over 100 degrees and incredibly humid. The heat continued virtually unabated throughout my six weeks and it can certainly cause a great shock to the system. My father, having put up with about a month of the hottest weather decided to head back to San Diego but my mother, who is originally from Canada, and I slowly



Senator Joe Biden with Josh Bruser

Josh Bruser is a grade 11 student in La Jolla, California. He worked as an intern in the office of United States Senator Joe Biden during the summer of 2002.

began to adapt and by the end we hardly noticed it anymore.

Senator Biden was Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Chairman of the Subcommittee of Crime and Drugs, and Chairman of the International Narcotics Control Committee. He also has a seat on the powerful Judiciary Committee, which he chaired in the 1980s when the Democrats had a comfortable majority in the Senate. The Senator has more than 70 offices in Washington and Delaware with over a hundred people working for him in Washington alone.

When I entered the main office for the first time I was met by the Senator's assistant chief of staff, Paul Rosen. Phyllis Martell, who was my intern coordinator was sick for my first day. Paul took me to the large back room where the interns worked. He introduced me to Trevor, an intern from Georgetown University, and Sarah Verth from Brighton, England who was spending the summer as an intern for Senator Biden.

Both had already been there for about four weeks. They showed me the basic work of the office, such as opening the large amount of mail. They explained that I could wear protective gloves if I wanted to protect myself from any anthrax or radiation threat. They also showed me how to sign letters that Biden's staffers had written to constituents. The Senator sends about 100 letters out to various constituents each day, and instead of signing them, his office has the "auto-pen" which is literally a machine with arms that reaches out and signs his signature.

There are lots of tedious tasks to be done in an office, and I think I did all of them during my first few weeks. I delivered toners for Xerox machines to the Senate Post Office to be mailed back to the toner company and refilled with ink. I went to buy flags at the Senate Stationary store and took them up to Printing and Graphics to be mailed to constituents. I photocopied the *Congressional Daily* and *Congressional Quarterly*, which I then distributed throughout all three Senate buildings. I had the time-consuming task of xeroxing the Senator's train vouchers and at one point Phyllis got angry with me because I misplaced a voucher.

As I became familiar with the Senate environment, I was given some more interesting tasks such as doing research at the Library of Congress. I worked with a very nice intern, Sarah Conboy, a Delaware native who attended Delaware State University. The research we did was on photo film strips that we pulled through a machine. The strips were of old newspapers from the *Delaware Sun Times*. They were magnified on a computer, and we had to look for articles with Senator Biden's name. After several hours of this you started to feel dizzy.

Two weeks into my internship, the interns switched. I had arrived in DC at an off-intern session, thus I was there for 1/3 of the first summer intern session and 2/3 of the second summer intern session. The interns for the second session were much friendlier. They included Katie from Duke University, Brant from Georgetown Dan from Harvard, Rachel from McGill University in Montreal, Bryce from Mississippi State University, and Anuj from the University of Illinois. The only intern who stayed was Sarah, the girl from England.

Julia, another staff assistant, showed me how to give a tour to constituents. This gave me a chance to see the Senate in action. On my first tour I watched Senator Paul Sarbanes, a Democrat from Maryland, debate Senator Phil Gramm, a Republican from Texas, about the Sarbanes Bill which would bring stronger punishment and more accountability to people who engage in corporate misconduct.

At this point I had been in Washington for three weeks and still had not met Senator Biden. So Dan Springer and I decided to go to a Foreign Relations Committee hearing to see him in action. But when we arrived Senator Feingold was in the chair and Senator Biden was nowhere to be seen. So we went to a luncheon with Senator Susan Collins, a Maine Republican, where she discussed improving the Navy. After that, we went to the House of Representatives, and watched them debate.

One day Rachel (the intern from McGill) came in all giddy. She got into an elevator, and right behind her was Senator Biden. He said to her "So which one of these bums do you work for?" Rachel, awestruck, replied "ummmm you". At which point Senator Biden and Senator Graham of Florida who was with him, broke down laughing uncontrollably. Talk about a classic way to meet your Senator!

My introduction came shortly thereafter. I was really late in photocopying and delivering the Press Clips, and Phyllis was not amused. When I returned she asked me to take something to the Senator's personal assistant's office. I did, and Senator Biden happened to be there. I said good afternoon to him, and he came over and shook my hand. We talked for a minute about my internship and how I met the Senator in California. I left the office ecstatic.

A day or two later I personally delivered the Senator his lunch (a salad). I had to run from SR-221 to S-211, which is on the other side of Capitol Hill. But the woman who gave me the salad forgot to give me dressing and a fork, so I had to run to the Senate Cafeteria, and was late getting back. Thankfully though, the Senator was not mad. The last thing I had to do that day was deliver a purse to a woman in the House Rayburn Building. She was a Delaware resident, and had come to visit Senator

Biden. Her child was going to be given some prestigious award, and on her way to the award luncheon, she left her purse at Senator Biden's office. It took a lot of searching and running around before I finally found the room she was in.

Toward the end of my internship, I began to give several tours. They generally consisted of the following: Leave Senator Biden's office, take the Senate Subway over to the Capitol. Take the underground walkway until you reach the tour elevator. Upstairs is the famous dome of the capitol, also known as the Rotunda. Discuss the Apotheosis on top of the Rotunda, and the Frieze that goes around it. Discuss the eight oil paintings that go around the room. Then walk over to Statuary Hall, also known as the "whispering room". The room's acoustics allow someone in one end of the room to whisper, and someone in another part of the room to hear. Demonstrate this to tourists, and discuss the statues in the room. Take the tourists downstairs into the Crypt, and discuss the catalfalque. Take them into the old Supreme Court Chamber, and then take them upstairs to the Senate Gallery so they can watch a Senate debate firsthand. Then exit the Capitol Building toward the Washington Monument, where the tourists get a wonderful view of the monument the fields, the Department of Agriculture and Commerce, and the Smithsonian.

On one tour I bumped into Congressman Gephardt, the House Minority Leader. Virtually no one knew who he was. Then Gary Condit walked by and everyone started pointing at him and saying "Look, it's Gary Condit!" And he waved back at everyone. How sad. Everyone in the nation knows an obscure Congressman named Condit while no one knew the House Minority Leader.

I think it was pretty close to the last day of my internship when Senator Biden called a roundtable for all his interns and junior staff members (basically those of us who never see him). We all had our pictures taken with him, and he talked to us for one-half hour. The reason, he explained, that he has not been able to see us, is because every night he has been travelling home to Delaware to be with his seriously ill father.

He told us what it has been like to be a United States Senator (he has been one for 30 years). He told us how he got President Clinton to send troops into Kosovo. He urged President Clinton to do so for two years, until one night at 3:00 in the morning, the President called and said "Joe, we are going in tomorrow"

Senator Biden also told us about his views on abortion, and how he is generally pro-choice. He told us that he believes abortion is morally wrong, and that it involves two competing lives, but that he could never tell another woman what she can and cannot do with her body.

Finally, he also told us about his first real decision in the Senate, which involved a debate over lead and coal.

Over the last few days of my internship, I saw many more Senators, because they had a lot more votes to finish up their business before the Senate recessed for the summer. It was during this point that Senator Biden was having a very critical debate regarding the treaty known as Support Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (SEDAW). This is generally a very pro-women treaty, which almost all the civilized world has signed. But the religious conservatives were out in full force. It was my job to answer the phones for several days. This was one of the most enjoyable aspects of the internship, because you talk to so many different people from around the country. Interns answer the phone saying "Senator Biden's Office".

The religious conservatives were calling in non-stop, literally, for a week. There was not one time when the phones were not busy. At one point, Dan Springer and I, played a joke on someone who wanted to speak to the Senator. I yelled to Dan, "Senator Biden, someone on the phone wants to speak to you!" Dan then answered, "Tell him that I appreciate his opinion, and that Joe sends his best regards!" The guy on the other line heard this, and actually believed it. It was mean, but funny. Senator Biden is so busy that he rarely reads his mail or takes phone calls. That is what his staff is for.

On the second last day of my internship, I was asked to work as Senator Biden's assistant at a Crime and Drug Hearing. My job was to pour water for all the Senators who attended (it turned out to be only Senator Biden and Senator Sessions). Various messages came into the anteroom, where I was stationed. At one point, I got a call from the President of Columbia, who needed to urgently speak to Senator Biden. I gave him the message, and he came into the anteroom and took the call. After I left the hearing, I had to find Senators Cantwell and Specter so they could to sign a bill they were cosponsoring with Senator Biden.

No matter how busy it was, staff and Senators seem to find time for the nightly softball games that take place on a field right below the capitol. Each Senator can opt to form a softball team. Senator Biden and Carper (the two Delaware Senators) had the Blue-Rocks team, composed of Biden, Carper, their staff, and interns. I remember one game we were playing the Dixie Chicks, a team composed of staff from Senators Landrieu and Lincoln, who are two of the nicest looking female Senators. We won the game. Senator Biden and Carper both played. They both chatted with players and spectators. It was very casual. These guys do not want to be treated like gods, they want to be treated as people.

Of course there were lots of other things to do in Washington away from the Capitol. I saw my share of museums and monuments but perhaps the most fun was attending the taping of CNN's *Cross Fire* at George Washington University. Tickets were free although you had to line up to get them in advance. It was great fun watching James Carville and Tucker Carlson match wits in front of a live audience.

I actually went twice. The first time with my mom and Rachel. The guests included Senators Boxer and Grassley, and they discussed corporate fraud. At the end, I got my picture with Carville and Carlson. As it turns out, Tucker is from La Jolla, and he went to La Jolla Country Day School. Later research on Tucker revealed that his mother is heir to the Swanson TV Dinner fortune. The second time I went the topic was still corporate fraud this time with Senator George Allen and Robert Reich. It also discussed whether or not prisoners should be able to

watch R and X rated movies in prison. I was selected to ask one of the questions. I decided to ask Republican Senator Allen why all the Republicans were blaming the Clinton administration for corporate misconduct, when all the CEOs who headed the companies in trouble were Republican partisans. Unfortunately several people were selected before me and I never got to ask my question on national television because time ran out.

As my internship came to a close, I began to reflect on the experience. I had worked for six weeks with some of the most powerful people in the world. I learned the idiosyncracies of Capitol Hill, and I now understand the legislative process. But the best part was the friendships and fun times I had with the other interns as well as the various staff members. It was not just about politics. It was about life. It is an experience I would recommend to anyone.