



I interned with Congressman Mike Castle, Republican of Delaware, for eight weeks during January and February 2005. I was selected to represent Deakin University as a participant in the 2005 Uni Capitol Washington Internship Programme, founded by Eric Federling.

During the course of my internship, I was fortunate to be involved in many aspects of working in a congressional office - more commonly known as working 'on the hill' - enabling me to learn about the processes and inner workings of an office in the United States House of Representatives. I was also privileged to experience various events 'off the hill' which enriched my understanding of the United States political mind-set.

While contributing to the daily administrative functions of the office, I also took the opportunity to converse with the Legislative Assistant's in Congressman Castle's office. This allowed me to learn about key issues and legislative policies in relation to health care, education, environment, business and finance, and foreign affairs. After speaking with the Chief of Staff in regards to what policy or issue I would like to focus on, I decided to research the Pro-Choice debate in the United States. Initial research led me to focus on comparing attitudes and legislation on a 'woman's right to choose' in the United States, Australia, and Canada. I was invited to attend two Pro-Choice related briefings, each providing insight into current issues, litigation and policy concerning abortion and women's reproductive rights. In addition to these briefings, I was invited to attend a dinner to celebrate the anniversary of a landmark abortion case in the United States. While this was a social event, it added to my understanding of the issue's scale and importance, and the extent of the public's involvement in debating the question of choice. Toward the end of my internship, I presented my research findings to Congressman Castle and the Chief of Staff.

Aside from developing my project, and conversing with staff and constituents, I was very fortunate to attend two significant events during my internship. The first event was the swearing-in ceremony for new and continuing members of Congress, held in the House of Representatives Chamber in the Capitol Building on January 4, where the members also voted for the Speaker of the House. This was a remarkable experience - usually attended by family members, not interns - where I was able to observe how members of Congress converse with each other on the Chamber floor. The second event was the Presidential Inauguration on January 20, where I was able to witness President Bush's swearing-in and speech before commencing his second term in office. The sharp division in public opinion was very apparent, as the days events were hindered by political activists and demonstrators opposed to 'four more years' of the Bush administration.

During my time as an intern, I also attended an information session at the Australian Embassy, where two staff members spoke to the Australian interns on current relations between Australia and America - focusing particularly on the Free Trade Agreement - and what to expect as an intern 'on the hill'. Another information session was held at the State Department, where three staff members - all of whom had been posted for 12 months or more in Australia - spoke about the State Department in general, as well as their work experiences and changing roles in the Department. Both information sessions concluded with interns asking questions, and this proved to be a great opportunity to seek answers on specific issues, or recent debates raised in the media.

There were numerous highlights throughout the eight weeks - too many to name here - but included a tour of the White House; a tour of the Pentagon; the Holocaust Museum; the International Spy Museum; and the Corcoran Gallery of Art. I went to Philadelphia and visited the Liberty Bell, Independence Hall, and the Constitution Centre, and spent two long weekends in New York. I also spent a day in Congressman Castle's state office in Wilmington, Delaware, where I met staff and joined the Congressman at two press conferences where he was announced as the new Co-Chair of the Diabetes Caucus.

In conclusion, my experience as an intern was productive and challenging, but very rewarding. I gained practical knowledge in how the American political system works, and in some cases, how it doesn't work. I now have a much greater understanding of the importance of past political leaders, and the legacy some have left behind. I am much more aware of the knowledge and responsibilities each staff member contributes to a congressional office like that of Congressman Castle's, and the importance of bi-partisan relations between fellow members of Congress and Senators alike. I have learnt to recognise the key issues affecting the lives of Americans, and to understand the importance of policy planning and communication to resolve some of those issues. My diverse experiences enabled me to share in an enriched cultural exchange with my American colleagues, learning about social and political differences as well as educating others on the Australian way of life. It was a steep learning curve at times, but the friendly demeanour of the staff made each new piece of information meaningful and relevant to a foreign student like myself. The internship was, in my opinion, an invaluable experience, as much for what I encountered 'on the hill' as for what I learnt 'off the hill'.

- Rhiannon Riches, Bachelor of Arts (History and Journalism), Deakin University