



For the first two months of 2006, Ryan Conroy, Saul Lazar and I spent our holidays interning in the offices of US Congressmen as successful applicants of the Uni-Capitol Washington Internship Program. As Deakin Law/Arts students, this internship, conducted through the Faculty of Arts, provided us with a fantastic opportunity to witness and be involved in policy-making in the world's most powerful legislature.

When Ryan, Saul and I first stepped into our respective offices in Washington D.C., it was impossible to know what to expect. We were near paralysed with a mixture of nerves, excitement, anticipation and sheer disbelief that this would be our home away

from home for the next two months. From the minute we entered the labyrinth-like halls of Congress we were thrown head-on into work. From the first day to the last, our time in Washington was packed to the brim with meetings, forums, hearings, and briefings as we rode the roller-coaster of the ongoing battle between the Democrats and the Republicans.

If asked to describe Washington D.C. in one word it would surely have to be 'political'. Capitol Hill of course is a hub of political activity, both domestic and international. The most challenging aspect of our work was on the domestic front, handling hundreds of phone calls from irate constituents about the abject failures of the new Medicare system, or their disgust at the corruption of Congressmen incriminated in the Jack Abramoff lobbying scandal or simply their confusion as to why American soldiers were being sent to die in Iraq. These were the sort of discussions that didn't end at work- they followed you home on the Metro and indeed anywhere you went in Washington. Everywhere in D.C. the air was filled with political murmurings- we were told that to survive in Washington you need to have an opinion on everything.

We soon discovered that as unofficial representatives of Australia, our opinions were very much sought after. Through the exploration of the differences and the similarities between our two countries and their respective governments, we were able to form genuine friendships with the staff we worked with, whilst gleaning first-hand knowledge of the intricacies of the American political system. We were involved in various aspects of our offices' work, from answering constituent mail to drafting speeches and Resolutions. Due to our positions as official members of staff and the unbelievable talents of our program founder and co-ordinator Eric Federling, we were afforded dozens of invaluable opportunities. During work hours we attended briefings and hearings such as watching the Senate grill Supreme Court Judge Nominee Samuel Alito and listening to representatives from the US Department of State trade comments with representatives from the UN about a new UN Human Rights Council.

After-hours we attended meetings Eric orchestrated for us in the U.S. State Department and the Australian Embassy in Washington and a political dinner in support of *Roe v Wade*, with Madeline Albright as guest speaker. On long weekends we orchestrated our own adventures into Irish pubs in Boston and Times Square in New York. Every other weekend we spent exploring various aspects of Washington D.C., a beautiful city cloaked in history and optical illusions. It is sprinkled very liberally with tributes to the past- you can't move for all the monuments. Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt...even Einstein is immortalised in D.C.

A highlight of our time in D.C. was a reception that was held on Capitol Hill to honour the UCWIP program that has placed 12 Australian students like us into the U.S. Congress for a number of years. Many of our Congressmen attended the reception, including Congressman Sam Farr (Democrat, California) and Congressman Alcee Hastings (Democrat, Florida). It was a wonderful evening and gave us a chance to reflect on everything we had achieved in our two months on the Hill. Each of us came to really respect and appreciate the Congressmen we were working for and the work they were doing, and were genuinely sorry to be leaving the friends we had made on the Hill.

Washington D.C. is a city full of amazing people and amazing opportunities. From both a professional and personal standpoint, swapping an Aussie Summer at the beach for a winter in the U.S. Congress in snow-covered D.C. was one of the best choices we've ever made.

- Sarah Dillon, Bachelor of Arts (International Studies)/Bachelor of Laws, Deakin University