

Working in the Texas Legislature

Posted on 25 August 2009

By W. Brenda Tso

It all began when I changed a \$60 mistake into a lifetime opportunity. In this instance, it was a \$60 ticket, not for speeding, not even for driving, but for riding the DART rail. That takes talent. Apparently, I had mistakenly bought a student ticket, thinking that "student" included college students. At the time, I was one of many college students employed by GalleryWatch, a legislative tracking service. My job was to sit in on legislative hearings and write a report on what occurred. One month later, as I was doing just that, my daydreaming somehow dredged up the memory of the ticket. I realized that, while it may be unorthodox, I was going to use the story to introduce myself to the committee chairman, a representative from Dallas, home of the notorious DART rail. It was a story that caused him to remember me, and two years later I began working for him, just in time for the 81st regular legislative session.

The representative I worked for was a longtime supporter of Tom Craddick, Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives since 2003, who, one month into the session, was ousted by the election of a new speaker, Joe Straus. As a result, I was just one of many who suddenly found themselves without a job that Thursday. I ran around Friday submitting resumes throughout the Capitol, and was hired the following Monday by another representative. What can I say? Events move fast during the legislative session. I landed in the Texas House of Representatives Committee on Border & Intergovernmental Affairs.

Now, as an experienced capitol employee with one regular session and one special session under my belt, I can truly say it was an experience every government junkie dreams of. It was utterly amazing to personally witness the events reported in the newspaper the next day, and I never knew what important person I would share an elevator with. The most exciting thing, however, was making a difference – working on legislation and bills that had a chance of becoming actual state law. People often fail to appreciate just how vast and complex the law is. It is virtually impossible to be an expert on every single code in Texas statutes and, sometimes, even experts in, say, the water code fail to see the unintended consequences of a certain bill. The government really is interactive – lawmakers partially rely on constituents, media, special interest groups, and non-profits to point out (either beforehand or retroactively) the issues and problems they had with legislation. In the end, the two bookcases full of codes and statutes that make up Texas law are a collaborative effort of more people than you can imagine.

Working at the Texas Capitol is definitely addicting, and once drawn in, many people fail to stay away for long. I myself will be leaving shortly to attend law school, but I have no doubt that I will be back one day at our sunset red capitol. As it is, I can only salute all of those in public service, for while the money may not be much, the results only make Texas a better place.

W. Brenda Tso received her B.A. in government in 2008. She was assistant committee clerk at the Texas House of Representatives, Committee on Border and Intergovernmental Affairs, and this year begins law school at Southern Methodist University. She received a Taborsky Scholarship and Governor's Fellowship in 2006.

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Learning to Govern, Learning to Live

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By Coby Chase

From time to time, investors like to know if they're getting a good return on their money. Midway through my college career my father naturally called to check on his investment.

"So what are you going to do with a government degree? Teach?" my father asked me.

"No. I'm going to govern. It's clearly stated in the name. I need \$100."

He got his answer, and to put the topic to rest for good, I slapped on the student tax. This degree was already paying off.

I knew then that UT-Austin was an outstanding place to practice governing. It still is. The campus has been an integral part of the state's political history since the day the University opened its doors in 1883. And besides, the state capitol is just down the street. There's no excuse whatsoever to leave school without any practical experience.

The Department of Government also has a stellar faculty that builds on itself each year. Every time I turn on any sort of media these days I find myself, along with the rest of the nation, absorbing the top-rate analysis of Bruce Buchanan, Jim Henson, or Daron Shaw. If you don't know who these guys are the honorable thing to do is to return your degree. Really.

In the first half of the 1980s, student government was reborn, and local, state, and national candidates had operations on campus. Still, since leaving the University in 1986 and being unleashed on our broader democracy, I've enjoyed some terrific experiences that I couldn't have imagined as an undergraduate. I've worked on a project for a governor, collaborated with some of Texas' and the nation's intellectual leaders on major initiatives, and built relationships with members of Congress and the Texas Legislature. And these days, I've expanded my government career portfolio to include large-scale public affairs, international relations, strategic planning, and media relations.

That's what college is supposed to do: prepare you for the bigger, bolder challenges. But you still need to bridge the gap between college and a satisfying career.

For me, there were three basic elements that made it all work properly. To start with, I was lucky to have a family who never lost faith that I was capable of success, even if it came about on my own terms. Second, UT is a bottomless diamond mine of people who change the world, and I accessed every one of them I could. This included administrators, professors, fellow students, and alumni. Those relationships still push me places today. And last, every day I pursued what I enjoyed. Unrealized passion is a person's worst enemy.

If I've left you with the impression that I planned my life to happen exactly the way it has, then let me disabuse you of that right now. No one is that good. Just be sure to keep your mind and your eyes open to new opportunities, especially ones that take you off the path you think you were on. Those are often the best adventures, and the University of Texas Department of Government prepares you to think your way through it.

Coby Chase received his B.A. in government in 1986, graduating as a Dean's Distinguished Graduate. He is director of government and public affairs at the Texas Department of Transportation.

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On The Campaign Trail

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By Brittany Ross

I was always raised that the one thing you never discuss over dinner is politics. As someone who has managed to make a career out of political campaigns, I always cringe when that inevitable question "what do you do?" comes up – I either have to lie or break that cardinal dinner conversation rule.

Without a doubt, the next question asked of me is, "how did you get into that, and why?" In my case, as part of my degree in Government, I interned on a campaign in Austin and then participated in UT's Bill Archer Fellowship Program, where I worked for EMILY's List, a D.C.-based political organization. After that I embarked on a seemingly endless road trip across the United States working to elect whichever candidate I thought best suited for the office for which they were running.

Even more diverse than where I've worked are the people I've worked with on each campaign. From the candidate, to other staff and volunteers, each has a unique background and political perspective. They also have their own reasons for dedicating their time to each election. Dedication is the most important part of the job description and more often than not we work night and day, seven days a week. In a campaign you never have enough time and you're always working against the clock.

I understand the perception of insider politics is often glamorized. The real work, however, isn't done in smoke-filled rooms rubbing elbows with the political elite. Campaigns are hard work, but you wake up every day knowing you can make a difference by working tirelessly for something in which you believe.

While the long hours can be exhausting, the work you do is incredibly rewarding. Some of my favorite moments have been attending Tribal Council meetings on Native American Reservations in an effort to understand the day-to-day issues; waking up at 3 a.m. on any given election day and putting up signs around polling sites to ensure the candidate has the best visibility; being involved in the production of the political advertisements, whether it be speaking, appearing, or editing; attempting to intimidate an incumbent U.S. Senator while dressed as Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz; leading conference calls with then Senator and now President Barack Obama, and becoming friends with members of his family; and the countless fundraisers, local parades, barbecues, and political party meetings. Of course, there isn't a day that I don't also have to take out the trash, literally.

Political campaigns don't come with as defined job descriptions as you may find elsewhere. As a result you get to try almost all aspects of a campaign: press and media relations, voter contact and volunteer recruitment, scheduling the candidate and staff appearances, organizing events, and my particular niche of fundraising. Once your area of campaigning is realized and your skills honed it is easy and fast to rise up the ranks and join the army of campaign professionals who crisscross the country every year to work on the next big race.

My first paid campaign position was as a volunteer coordinator for a gubernatorial campaign in Virginia. I spent my days making phone calls to anyone who would take the time to listen to my pitch, oftentimes ending up in hearing only a loud slam of the phone. It's never easy going at first, but if it's a career you're interested in, just stick with it. Although it's only been a few short years, I now work with top tier candidates as a consultant and oftentimes have to turn down work.

I can't say political campaigning is a career meant for everyone. In fact, I'd say it is the career for the few. The long tedious days of crunching votes and donor numbers far outnumber those spent rubbing elbows with the political elite. But in the end, on the day after the election, after you have caught up on some much needed sleep, you realize it was worth it because you know you fought your heart out for something in which you so strongly believe.

Brittany Ross received her B.A. in government, and B.S. in communications, in 2004. She was an Archer Center fellow in 2003, and has worked in electoral politics for more than five years for a variety of candidates, including U.S. Senator Kay Hagan, Congresswoman Mazie Hirono, and President Barack Obama. She currently holds the position of finance director working to elect the first female governor of Tennessee.

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The Bunche Experience

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By Kiah Lewis

Every year, 20 students from across the nation are chosen to participate in the Ralph Bunche Summer Institute (RBSI) at Duke University, directed by Dr. Paula McClain. Ralph Bunche, the 1950's Nobel Peace Prize recipient, was a passionate advocate for education and civil rights. In honor of his endeavors, this program is geared toward encouraging minority students to pursue research in political science. Participants take graduate-level courses in Statistics and Race & Politics, which supplement an original research project that is completed over the course of the program. Additionally, the Graduate School Fair and weekly presenters provide substantial networking opportunities. I was fortunate enough to be afforded this notable opportunity, and the experience has provided me life-long friends and will continue inspiring me to pursue research in political science.

Academically, RBSI was one of the most challenging experiences of my college career so far. One participant described the program as "one of those things that you look back on and think 'how did I get through that?' but are happy that you did it." The weekly readings and discussions on race and politics were extensive yet thought provoking. After the first class discussion, fellow participants and I spent nearly the rest of the day debating issues presented in class. However, as engaging as those discussions were, the biggest challenge of RBSI was completing an original, empirical-based research project over the course of only four weeks. Using statistical analysis from various data sets, we developed and tested a hypothesis derived from our research interest. Although this was a great deal of work, I enjoyed putting forth the effort, especially since we were able to focus on a topic that was of personal interest. I wrote my paper on Black/Latino coalitions – it was called, "Commonality – Competition = Coalition? The Effect of Hispanic Perceptions of Competition with Blacks on the Potential for Coalition Building."

As the program moved forward, the coursework became more rigorous, but we received a great deal of support from the RBSI faculty and staff. As one Bunche participant noted, "The professors and teaching assistants present at RBSI were ... intellectual, passionate about what they were doing, and really helped [us] along the way." In addition, the participants formed a support group that allowed us to laugh at 2 a.m. in the computer lab while holding each other accountable to complete our work.

RBSI challenged me academically and I have also built social networks that I feel will last a lifetime. At first, I did not realize that my acceptance into RBSI was a welcome into a close network of political scientists known as 'Bunches'; however one of the noteworthy aspects of this program was the relationships built with other scholars. As one scholar expressed, "fellow participants brought a wealth of experiences, goals, and perspectives ... Indeed, they are the ones who have made the greatness of this experience unique and unrepeatable." I look forward to seeing my fellow Bunches accomplish great things in the world of political science.

Kiah Lewis is a government senior. She is the first student from the University of Texas to attend the Ralph Bunche Institute of the American Political Science Association.

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What must Republicans learn from the Obama Campaign?

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By Max Everett

As often happens in political parties after an election defeat, Republicans are in the midst of soul searching and rebuilding. While the traditional activities such as finding a new voice for the party, announcing winning ideas, and recruiting new candidates are occurring, another discussion is also underway. Political professionals at every level are attempting to distill the lessons of the Obama campaign and its incredibly effective efforts on the internet.

The constant television ads that voters in swing states are subjected to every fourth November will continue to lose ground; a survey released this year showed that Americans are now spending as much time online as they do watching TV each week. Political operatives for both parties are beginning to understand that how campaigns and candidates talk to the electorate is changing more quickly than any time since the advent of television, and in ways that are fundamentally different from traditional mass media.

Social networks have become the great buzzword in fields from politics to social science to marketing, and with good reason. Never before has there been a place where people gathered together based on such a virtually endless catalog of common interests. From political interests to ownership of a particular breed of dog to love of a particular product, there is probably a social network somewhere online devoted to it. The ability to communicate in a targeted manner to a group sharing common interests is rapidly becoming the new retail politics.

The 'magic' driving political opportunity on all these new channels to communicate online is data. Politics has long been driven by data, from national opinion polls to internet the votes at a straw poll; but the volume and depth of the data available on the Internet is qualitatively different. Instead of general messages, and geo-targeted models of voters, granular information from social networks, cookies, and base-on-branding now allow messages to be tailored and focused to an audience of one in some cases. Traditional voter files can now be appended to commercial advertising data and social network data, so campaigns can channel get-out-the-vote efforts to particular voters, on specific streets in specific precincts, who voted in previous elections, and appear to fit their profile of likely voters.

But perhaps the biggest change brought on by these advances in technology is a change in expectations. Users of social networks online expect, in fact demand, interactivity. We see this in the massive growth of new social networks that offer people ways to not only connect, but also control their experience online. Those who will succeed in using this medium understand that it is a two-way street. Simply blasting a message out will not bring results. In fact, that type of behavior online may have a very negative effect.

The core lesson of the Obama campaign is that the desire for voters to feel involved in the campaign and no longer simply be spectators. Participants in social networks expect to see results of their involvement, and that helps drive perhaps the greatest value of social networks for candidates. The Obama campaign's effort resulted in online supporters creating thousands of hours of video on YouTube and contacting millions of friends and neighbors. It also helped them create an unprecedented fundraising engine – people are more likely to donate to something in which they feel a sense of ownership. It remains to be seen whether Republicans can learn and apply the lessons from the Obama efforts and apply them broadly to campaigns of all sizes.

Max Everett received his B.A. in government in 1994. He also holds a J.D. from the University of Houston, worked on both of George W. Bush's presidential campaigns, has served at several federal agencies, and was previously chief information officer for the White House and the 2008 Republican National Convention. He is currently chief technology officer at NetPower Strategy.

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Hinich Named Methods Inaugural Fellow

Posted on 25 August 2009

Mel Hinich has been designated as one of 20 inaugural Fellows of the Society for Political Methodology.

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Box-Steffensmeier Named Methods Inaugural Fellow

Posted on 25 August 2009

Janet Box-Steffensmeier has been designated as one of 20 inaugural Fellows of the Society for Political Methodology

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