

THE PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE:
A SUMMER WELL SPENT

Sara Neumann
December 14, 2005

Introduction

Washington, D.C. is an exciting, vibrant city filled with endless possibilities. From lobbying firms to law firms, think tanks to theater, Washington is a city where anyone and everyone can find their own niche. The most unique characteristic of Washington, however, is that it serves as the nation's capital. Because of this, endless possibilities exist to work for the federal government, whether it be in Congress, the White House, the Supreme Court, or one of the hundreds of agencies like the Securities and Exchange Commission or the Department of Homeland Security. In addition to GW's Political Communication program – unlike any other major in the country – the reason why I came to GW was because of the plethora of opportunities available in public service. From a young age, I've always been interested in public service. I think it grew from my parents' values and beliefs that you should always help your neighbors, give back to your community, and try to make the world a better place – even on the smallest scale. Washington was the logical place for me to pursue my undergraduate years, and hopefully, many, many more.

Over the course of my sophomore year, I worked for two semesters in Congress. During the fall, I interned in Congressman Chris Shays' office (R-CT), primarily executing constituent services such as writing letters, giving tours, and acting as a general support for the office. During the spring semester, I worked for Senator Chris Dodd (D-CT). I was given the opportunity to work on the Subcommittee for Children and Families, of which Senator Dodd is the ranking member (recently renamed the Subcommittee on Education and Early Childhood Development). I researched, recommended, and helped to write legislation regarding health, education, and issues about children and families.

Building on these experiences, I felt that the next logical step was to apply for a summer White House Internship. I had already put a deposit down on my summer housing when I found out that I wasn't offered a position at the White House. For the next two weeks, I applied for several jobs and internships that interested me because I was destined to stay in DC for the summer. I found that they all revolved around communication positions at organizations that I believe work for a good cause. I sent applications to the Peace Corps, the Points of Light Foundation, the National Press Foundation, and several others. After several interviews, I decided to take an offer at the Partnership for Public Service to serve as a communications fellow.

Partnership for Public Service

The [Partnership for Public Service](#) (PPS) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to revitalizing public service in light of a looming human capital crisis within the federal workforce. I was unfamiliar with the "crisis," so before I started at PPS, I picked up a copy of Dr. Jay Liebowitz's *Addressing the Human Capital Crisis in the Federal Government*.¹ After reading it, I learned that in 2000, Senator George Voinovich of Ohio led the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, Restructuring, and the District of Columbia to produce a report entitled "Report to the President: The Crisis in Human Capital."² In it, the subcommittee reported that more than half of the federal workforce would be eligible to retire in the next four years, leaving a very thin pipeline of talent available to replace those imminent losses.

¹ Jay Liebowitz, *Addressing the Human Capital Crisis in the Federal Government*. (New York: Butterworth Heinemann Press) 2004. 223 pages.

² This report is available online at www.senate.gov/~gov_affairs/humancapital.pdf. Accessed 24 July 2005.

The Partnership works to inspire Americans to federal government service and transform the way government works. In its activities and publications, the Partnership focuses its energy on achieving leverage through entrepreneurial partnerships and collaboration.

I thought it would be interesting to look at the history of the federal civil service and found a wonderful book created by the Office of Personnel Management. Entitled *Biography of an Ideal: A History of the Federal Civil Service*, it described the change in attitude and opinion about civil service jobs. In the foreword, written by then Director Kay Coles James, she expressed that *Biography of an Ideal* is dedicated to the “countless public servants in whose footsteps the next generation will follow; men and women who, throughout the years, have applied their talent, skills, and energy on behalf of our country.”³

I also read Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*,⁴ partly because Professor Gross had us read an excerpt from it in our PoliComm 100 class, but more importantly because I wanted to see if Putnam had created a link between “American Community” and the federal civil service. I was disappointed to see that he didn’t, so I look forward to exploring this area later in my academic career.

First Day

I didn’t know what to expect on my first day, but looking back, it flew by. I met with Beth, the fellow coordinator, and we talked about what I was interested in getting out of my summer experience. Next, I met with the members of the communications team. For the number of press releases, newsletters, articles, and other material the communications team produces, I was astonished to learn that it was comprised of a marketing manager, media relations director,

³ Office of Personnel Management. *Biography of an Ideal: A History of the Federal Civil Service*. 2002.

⁴ Robert Putnam. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (Simon & Schuster: New York), 2000.

staff writer, and vice president for communications. Lauren was the first communication team member I sat down with and she helped me understand what her role is as the marketing manager. She talked about several projects in our half-hour meeting and told me she was looking forward to my help with the summer newsletter, the website overhaul project, and writing and designing different marketing materials for the Partnership.

Welcome to the World of Media Relations

Next, I met with Bethany, the director of media relations. She had me fill out a survey at the beginning of our meeting to assess the skills I hoped to develop that summer. I remember writing that I was interested in learning how to write a press release, pitch a story to the press, create talking points, media lists, talk to reporters, and many other essential communication skills that I was unfamiliar with in May. It's stunning to see where I am now – because all of these tasks are now things that I do every day. She also told me that part of my job would be to research and write public service announcements that would air on Federal News Radio AM 1050. I was excited to embrace the challenge of writing for radio.

Service to America Medals

After lunch on that first day, Bethany and I sat down to talk about my biggest summer project: the Service to America Medals. These national public service awards for federal employees are also known as the Sammies. Civil servants are nominated by their peer and vetted by the Partnership for Public Service and the Atlantic Media Company (the other organization that sponsors these honors). Then, awardees are chosen through a secret ballot by a selection committee. This year there were nine categories that ranged in different areas of government

service including National Security, Science and Environment, Justice and Law Enforcement, Homeland Security, Social Services, and International Affairs. There were also three special categories of honors including the Career Achievement Medal, Call to Service Medal, and Federal Employee of the Year.

As the communications fellow, I was responsible for helping with all communications aspects of the awards, from helping to write profiles of the thirty finalists to pitching their stories to local, regional, and national media outlets.

Write and pitch I did. That first week at the Partnership, I was so busy – much busier than the other new fellows. But I knew the work I was doing was important, and the communications team was counting on me to help complete profiles of 30 finalists so they could be reviewed by the selection committee. I learned a few days later that the committee was composed of some of the most influential people in Washington including Judy Woodruff, Former Secretary Tom Ridge, and many others.

It wasn't until my second week that Bethany called me into her office. She told me that she had been planning a vacation to Italy with her husband at the end of June. It didn't really hit me why this should matter until we looked at the calendar together – she would be out of the country the day of the Sammies Finalist Breakfast, an event that honored all 30 Service to America Medal Finalists held on Capitol Hill. I was nervous at the thought of pitching stories to journalists – something I had never done before – let alone coordinate media for a prestigious event in Washington. Was Bethany nuts? I certainly thought so, letting a 20-year-old intern do work that she's done for several years! As I left Bethany's office, she looked at me and said, "Sara, I've seen your work so far and I know you'll be great. Besides, I'm here for two more weeks so we can work everything out."

The next two weeks were a blur. Bethany not only taught me how to pitch a story to a journalist but the most important part too: following up after initial contact. I would do practice phone calls with Bethany on the other line and, in the beginning, I found that I got a little flustered. Bethany would ask hard questions, but I had the opportunity to have her help me phrase answers. She taught me one of the best things in those early days in June...not to be scared to tell a journalist that I'd get back to him or her if I didn't have the exact answer they needed. Bethany assured me that they'd want the right information a half hour later as opposed to an incorrect answer immediately.

By the time I called my first journalist, I was ready. The reporter was hooked, and I sent my first follow up email shortly after our conversation. I really enjoyed making these calls to journalists and providing them with a news item. I never viewed composing the follow up emails as burdensome or tedious – I loved filling in all of the details from our conversation or the voicemail that I would leave. It's a good thing I liked it because for three weeks, that's all I did. I'd call practically any journalist that would listen to me and any news outlet that *might* consider running a story. Because there were 30 finalists, I was pitching stories to people across the country, from California to New York, Minnesota to New Mexico.

Service To America Medals Finalist Breakfast

The day had finally come...the day when hundreds of government officials, colleagues, and coworkers of 30 extraordinary public servants would convene in the Reserve Officer's Association Building on Capitol Hill. Although Trudi, the Partnership's vice president for communications at the time, was there to provide guidance for me if necessary, I was largely flying solo – but I felt ready.

The Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday before the event, I was talking to public affairs officers at all of the agencies who had a winning employee including the IRS, the Department of State, NASA, and the Department of Homeland Security among several others. I kept calling reporters and spoke with reporters from *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and even the *Associated Press*.

In those three days, I confirmed the attendance of five journalists at the breakfast and checked in with all of my other reporters around the country to make sure they had all the details they needed. Before the breakfast, I facilitated interviews between Max Stier, the Partnership's President and CEO, finalists, and the press. My biggest success was convincing a *Knight Ridder* national correspondent (name withheld for privacy) to attend. He had been wavering between coming and not, and ultimately, he decided to give the breakfast a shot. What resulted was a wonderful clip that ran in *Knight Ridder* newspapers from Alaska to Florida, Maine to California.

The day of the Finalist Breakfast is one I will never forget. I played the role of the media coordinator that morning and greeted public affairs officers, reporters, and photographers as they arrived. I made sure that the reporters and public affairs officers alike spoke with our CEO and the finalists who they were interested in interviewing. I even helped set up a videographer from the United States Post Office to record the whole event. All of the hard work paid off the next morning when I typed "Service to America Medals" into GoogleNews and saw more than 30 clips appear. It was this incredible hands-on experience that really made me realize that media relations is the career I want to pursue once I graduate from GW.

Everyone at the Partnership was so impressed with the way in which I handled the press, the agency communications people, the finalists, and myself. The *Knight Ridder* correspondent

pulled aside Lauren, a member of the communications team, and asked if I was the Press Secretary. Lauren smiled and replied that I was going into my junior year of college and that this was my summer fellowship. Then he approached me and complimented me on the way I handled everything up to and during the breakfast. He told me he was proud – and that I certainly had a bright future in media relations!

Other Summer Projects

As I mentioned before, I really played an integral role in several other projects. I helped overhaul the Partnership's website and internally organize a lot of the communications team's documents on the shared drive at work. I never thought that the tasks that were assigned to me were boring and I knew that the things I completed really helped the Partnership.

I was in charge of maintaining the Partnership's media archive as well as keeping an Excel spreadsheet that we use to track where and why we generated media attention up to date. It was neat to see what type of coverage we received in the media, whether it was an event related to our mission, our programs, or our positions and where these clips were from – online, print, or broadcast media.

One of my biggest accomplishments was writing more than 50 Public Service Announcements – all of which were broadcast on Federal News Radio AM 1050. Seeking input from Bethany and other members of the staff, I would brainstorm ideas about neat things the federal government was doing and ultimately, create one minute PSA's. I thought that it would be so easy to write for radio, but I remember submitting my first batch to Bethany. She helped me edit them and truly make them “read” for radio. I learned that a minute is an extremely short

amount of time and the lead is crucial – otherwise we’ll lose our listener. Above all else, I learned that every word counts.

Fall Semester

It was a few weeks after the successful Sammies Finalist Breakfast that Beth invited me out to coffee. She raved about how well I did with the Sammies in the summer and asked me – because I was a GW student – to remain the Communications Fellow during the fall semester. How could I say no?! The Partnership is an organization that I truly adore, and I couldn’t imagine any other way to spend my fall semester.

The Selection Committee determined a winner for each of the nine categories so it became my job to help Bethany pitch the nine winners’ stories to the press before the Service to America Medals Black Tie Gala, which was scheduled to be held on September 28, 2005. After the Gala, I became immersed in several other projects, which taught me even more about the field of communications. I got to help Lauren create a marketing plan for the 2006 Sammies, write thank you notes to dignitaries on our selection committee, and pitch several different stories, unrelated to the Sammies, to the press.

I really see how much I’ve grown and learned in the field of Media Relations. I know now that it’s something I’m really interested in and. I just feel so fortunate to have had so many great role models at the Partnership.

Conclusion

A wise man once said, “Man cannot discover new oceans until he has courage to lose sight of the shore.”⁵ To me, internships are rafts that college students can use to begin navigating life’s ocean and, perhaps, to discover a career path originally unfamiliar to them. Ultimately, internships provide students with an opportunity that textbooks and lectures alone can never supply. I was extremely fortunate to gain these experiences by spending a full summer in Washington working at the Partnership for Public Service. I was so honored when they asked me to stay through the fall semester, particularly to work on pitching stories about our Service to America Medal finalists, as well as complete all of the other essential communications tasks that I do. I recently learned that I’m the only fellow in the Partnership’s history to ever stay more than one term. Bethany even wrote in an email last week that she (and everyone else) wants me to stay at PPS forever! It’s a fantastic, wonderful feeling to “click” with such a positive organization.

As I have had the opportunity to reflect on the summer, I’ve realized that working in communications for a cause I believe in emanated from a childhood love. By building on something that was so important to me, I’ve come to understand that, much like a booster rocket is jettisoned and falls away even as its thrust propels the payload into outer space, my internship at the Partnership for Public Service was my booster rocket to a life full of media relations opportunities and success. Now, the questions remains...what can I do next semester that can top this experience?

⁵ E.L. Easton. *English Online*. <http://eleaston.com/courage.html>. <Accessed 12 December 2004>.