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**An overview of my internship with Congressman David Skaggs
and how this set a course for my career in political campaigning.**

By my senior year at CU I had changed my major twice and had gone from dreaming of a career as a journalist and traveling the world working for National Geographic, to serving in the Peace Corp and teaching English in West Africa. I was all over the map as far as picking out a career for myself and couldn't hone in on one area of interest. I excelled in foreign languages and history but there didn't seem to be a job which I could envision in those areas and my father wasn't too subtle about what he'd like me to pursue by sending me articles on beginning salaries for lawyers. He was a maritime lawyer and felt that the law was a perfect career.

I had settled on a major in Political Science as I had always been interested in government and my mother was particularly active in local politics. She had a heavy influence on my knowledge of current affairs and our dinner conversations were about the war in Iran and the Ayatollah Khomeini, the Civil Rights movement which she was passionate about, or we'd discuss the Kennedy assassinations and what that meant to her generation. Politics and American Government felt familiar to me and it seemed like a natural progression to major in political science. However I knew I didn't want to pursue a career in the law and yet nothing stood out as an "aha!" job for me and with that came a constant level of anxiety. It was 1988 and many of my peers were interviewing on the Boulder campus with formidable companies such as Price Waterhouse, Unum Insurance,

and several investment banking firms which only added to the uncertainty of my future. The media played a role with movies like Wall Street in having an influence on the lifestyle we should work towards achieving and our generation was expected to become the newly-coined term “yuppies.”

Thankfully I had a roommate who was equally vague about her future and she and I would sit on the worn couch of our living room on the hill in Boulder and watch our friends don their dark suits with bow tie blouses and head off to campus for another round of interviews hoping they’d land a job before graduation. Many of them were successful and had offers before graduation making themselves and their parents happy. They seemed to have a special confidence by that spring: they had a plan. I however, felt confused and often melancholy that my days at CU were numbered. I loved my life as a CU student as well as the friends I’d made and professors I’d gotten to know. There was a looming feeling I would be expected to find a job and hopefully one I enjoyed.

As with all college students I had a wide spectrum of friends with varying majors and though I had decided to stick with Political Science I wasn’t sure what kind of a job my major would afford me. I knew I didn’t want to practice law (much to my father’s dismay) but I did have a particular interest in my American Government courses. I particularly enjoyed a class where we studied political parties and how and why people align themselves with like-minded people to form their political beliefs. I enjoyed my major but was unsure where it was leading me in comparison to my friends in the Business School. All I knew was that since high school I had a keen interest in American history and government.

One of the beautiful things about being a college student is how easy it is to connect with many people on any given day and how those connections can lead to opportunities. Whether it's someone sitting in the UMC sharing their enthusiasm for a certain class they are taking, or how they have a friend of a friend who can get them a job for the summer. Information and people were right at our fingertips unlike any other time in our lives though in comparison to today's access to information it seems archaic. On one of the many occasions of connecting with friends I bumped into a friend of mine who was also a political science major and he shared with me that he had just completed a rewarding internship for a local congressman. He encouraged me to interview for the spring semester as he found it to be such an integral part of his education and enjoyed the people in the office. I was open to exploring new endeavors and was interested in applying some of my studies into a work experience and I applied and got the internship. However, in order to earn college credit for this internship, I had to find a CU political science professor to sponsor me.

I had taken several classes with Professor Rozek, a memorable professor whom I respected. The Cold War was in full swing and we were taking courses such as Soviet Foreign Policy where he unapologetically taught us of the evils of Communism and Totalitarianism. Professor Rozek shared his life experience of escaping the Nazis and later fighting them in World War II, being shot and eventually making it to the U.S. and subsequently earning a doctorate at Harvard. On a campus that was renowned for its liberal politics he stood out as conservative professor who spoke from experience. No matter your political beliefs, he was someone who spoke from life experience and had literally lived the American Dream. He had no tolerance for students who took their

education and their freedoms for granted. I recall one class where he was lecturing on Alexandr Solzhenitsan and Professor Rozek was imploring us to write letters to him as he was exiled for his criticisms of the Soviet Union. A student had fallen asleep in the front row and Mr. Rozek asked the sleeping student's neighbor to wake him up. Once he was awake Professor Rozek looked him in the eye with such intensity and yelled in his thick Polish accent, "You! You are a playboy and when you get out in the world you are going to have to compete with students who graduated from Harvard and the University of Chicago! You better pay attention!" I'd never seen nor heard anything like that and I instantly admired him. He cared and he wanted his students to care.

When people talk about where they were when the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded in 1986, I was in Professor Rozek's Governments of Germany and Russia class. His secretary came into our class with a somber face and told Professor Rozek what had happened. He very quietly told us that class was canceled and we should go home. I believe that Professor Rozek had such deep respect for this country and wanted to impart that deep respect to us by telling us to go home and think about the astronauts, their families and our country.

Though Congressman David Skaggs was a liberal democrat representing equally liberal Boulder, Professor Rozek, happily agreed to sponsor my internship with the congressman and as he signed the necessary paperwork he said, "He's a good man." It was clear that he was not going to let his politics get in the way of my education.

In January of 1988 I started my internship for Congressman David Skaggs D-Boulder whose local office was located in Westminster. I drove down to Westminster

twice a week and it was the first time I had traveled outside of Boulder as I was from California and didn't know the Denver Metro area and it was all new to me.

His scheduler Carla Lucero, greeted me on my first day and told me that I'd be taking over her job by answering the phones and routing them to the correct staff person depending on the subject matter. Though I had taken the necessary civics classes in school as well as studied the legislative branches, it wasn't until this first day of my internship where I truly understood the duties of a federal legislator. David Skaggs had a local office as well as a D.C. office with his staff juggling many of the issues important to his district. Much of the local offices' responsibility was to field calls and letters from constituents who either wanted legislation passed or a to voice a concern about a national issue. I became the first point of contact for constituents as making phone calls, writing letters or face-to-face meetings were the only ways to convey your message to the Congressman. I was nervous and anxious as this was my introduction into a professional politics. I had held many prior jobs but they were typical of a college student; retail, restaurant, babysitting etc. This was an environment of serious and well-educated people who carefully scrutinized every letter, speech, or interaction the Congressman had with his constituents. Though I was only an intern, I was no exception to this level of expectation.

Each person in the office handled a different area of expertise and my job was to route the phone call or letter to the correct staff person. If a call was about scheduling the Congressman for an event, Carla handled his schedule. If there was a concern about Rocky Flats (nuclear weapons production facility in Boulder at the time), that call was routed to another staff person. Rocky Flats was a very hot topic in David Skaggs' district

as the threat of nuclear war was still hanging. There were constant protests at the site and Rocky Flats was in the Congressman's district. I had knowledge of nuclear weaponry and proliferation but had never witnessed people's protests and arguments against the site and began to understand their concerns as did the Congressman.

Chief of Staff Stephen Saunders handled all legislation and bills being introduced both for the local office and the D.C. office. From the first week of my internship my learning curve was on an upward trajectory. I had to familiarize myself with the pressing issues of the day as constituents would call and voice their concerns. Suddenly I was scouring the newspapers and connecting some of the national issues between what I was studying in class and researching in my internship. We had to document each call that came in from a concerned voter and forward that information to the correct staff person. I was getting an earful from constituents about the pressing issues of 1988. English-only bills being introduced in Congress, the threats of nuclear war with the Soviets, the democratic presidential primary, and the biggest stories from my recollection was the Iran-Contra affair. I can recall some of the staff getting into a heated discussion about whether it was discrimination or not if the U.S. were to mandate that all government information be in English and hearing both sides argue their opinion was novel and eye-opening. I began to realize that though I had been raised to know and understand current affairs in the world, there was still so much to learn.

My job as an intern was to either refer the constituents to the staff person handling that subject matter or to record the phone call in a log so we could keep accurate track of how David's constituents felt about the issues. This was helpful information to him as he

crafted his message when giving speeches or to be prepared for an event in case there would be opponents of his at the event.

I wasn't reading in a textbook about how people felt about the issues or about domestic developments but rather I was listening to them, interacting with them so as to best represent the Congressman so they felt understood. It was fast-paced and I had to quickly move on to the next phone call. I had to write down their opinions and I loved the connection I was making with the congressman's constituents as some were passionate about their opinions, some simply wanted to talk, and others you questioned their sanity. It was exciting work and I never missed a day of my internship. The classroom work which I had done for the three and a half years at CU prior to my internship was necessary as it helped me with critical thinking and maturity to handle this professional environment. My political science courses of International Relations and Judicial Systems in particular were helpful when engaging in conversations with the staff. In several of my general education and political science courses, we debated and analyzed pressing issues of the day and it felt like a natural progression for me to apply this knowledge in a hands-on experience.

Another responsibility I was given was to peruse the D.C. newspaper Roll Call and pull out any articles which David Skaggs was mentioned and file the articles. Where I had studied current events in my classes at CU and of course had studied extensively how the U.S. Congress functioned, now I had a personal connection and read with more intent and purpose. It was experiential learning in politics and it was high energy, and dynamic and very different from my lectures in a classroom. The internship was a way to

take some of the subjects which I had studied as a political science major and understand their place in the real world and why we study those subjects.

Congressman Skaggs' office was patient with me but made it clear that at all times I was expected to be professional and respectful. I was also asked to attend local events which David Skaggs' office sponsored and be a part of the advance team preparing for the event by organizing volunteers or simply making nametags. I would see names like Governor Roy Romer, or Senator Tim Wirth or Ben Nighthorse-Campbell. As I was from San Francisco I was unfamiliar with these names but I quickly learned their names and how we were to conduct ourselves with them. By the second or third month of my internship I was told that I would be the congressman's driver over the weekend and would drive him to his various events throughout Denver.

This experience seemed like a straightforward duty but it was the day I learned how important of a role the media plays in a politician's life. As I drove Congressman Skaggs' to his first event I was told to drop him off, park and then use a separate entrance to the event. The senior staff members made it clear that I would not walk in the door with the Congressman and I was confused. Among other reasons but most importantly, Gary Hart's presidential campaign the year before and the scandal behind his campaign with an aide from his staff had most politicians sensitive to having a female intern appear with them at events. As ridiculous as it seems now, it was a reactive response by his staff. Elected officials were cognizant of what the media would find interesting and when I reflect on this reaction I can see what an anti-feminist issue this was as I knew a male intern wouldn't have been asked to enter separately. I simply did what was asked of me and didn't have the understanding to raise any objection. This was a matter that I

could have never studied or learned in a classroom and this observation taught me many things: One was how much a candidate's image matters to their being able to do their job. If the media were caught up in intrigue and scandal, they were not writing about the politician's achievements and successes and therefore made their re-election that much more difficult. Second it became clear how important it was to have smart and professional staff to represent the candidate's ideals. At these events I represented David Skaggs' office and if constituents couldn't speak with him, they would speak with me. I was then expected to shuttle the congressman out of the event so we could make it to the next one on time – again a reflection of him and his staff. The Congressman was kind, professional, and very serious. I recall speeding on Highway 36 coming back to Boulder and he stoically said, "It'd be a good idea for you to slow down." I was horrified but to this day, I don't speed on 36.

Taking on this role was thrilling for me as the events were engaging and I was able to rub shoulders with senators, congress people, and other elected officials. Going to my classes between my days of interning seemed to lack the same energy and intensity and I began to understand what I wanted in a job after graduation. Working in the Congressman's office was a way for me to have my area of specialty – a job that suited my strengths and abilities where I could meet a wide variety of people and learn about the important issues in Colorado. This internship made my world bigger than it had been as a student and it became important to me that I continue learning in my job. It felt like I belonged to an area of expertise and I felt more confident about my skills and less confused. When interacting with other students on campus, I had a purpose and something which I was excited about to share with them. Working in the Congressman's

office felt like a perfect fit between my interest in current affairs, American government, and interacting with different kinds of people.

One day while sitting in the front office sifting through the mail (one of the grunt jobs given to the interns), I opened up a box which was filled with bright, colorful bumper stickers which read “David Skaggs for Congress.” I had heard conversations in the office about David Skaggs’ re-election campaign, but was unaware of the work going on to prepare for his campaign.

As my experience with political campaigns up until this point consisted of my mother taking my brother and I with her while she went door to door to campaign for McGovern when I was six-years-old, to say I was naïve to all the work involved in a political campaign was an overstatement. As a former journalism major I briefly considered advertising as a career and seeing these bumper stickers, as basic as they were, I was immediately taken with the marketing behind the political campaign. How did they decide on the colors for the bumper stickers, who designed the logo, the yard signs, the message behind his campaign speeches or the direct mail pieces? I asked who made these bumper stickers and Carla told me that it was David’s political consultant of the Denver-based political consulting firm Stratton, Reiter and Dupree. She explained that separate from his work as a Congressman, David was preparing his a run for re-election and his political consultant handled all the behind-scenes workings of his campaign. He handled the campaign strategy, hired campaign managers, created visuals for the campaign and worked closely with the candidate to prepare him for public speeches. This was my “aha!” moment as I immediately felt a connection to this area of work – political consulting.

It hadn't occurred to me that I could make a career out of working on political campaigns and political consulting was an area that seemed creative, dynamic and multi-faceted.

One of the first things explained to me was that all campaign work was to be done in a different office than the Westminster congressional office. I learned that FEC standards mandated that election work not take place in the government office so a separate office was established. Though I was still working in the congressional office performing my internship duties, I found myself wanting to be in the campaign office observing and taking in all of the functions of the campaign and my interest was piqued. Immediately I knew that this was what I wanted to do. Though I knew nothing about the industry, I wanted to be a part of this political consulting thing and the hands-on learning during this internship had now opened up a whole new career path for me and I was shown all the various job prospects that are under the Politics umbrella.

As graduation was fast-approaching I realized that because of my internship, I had options. I had choices such as working in D.C. in a congressional office, finding a government agency to work for such as Common Cause, or finding a political consultant to hire me to work on one of their campaigns.

My new experience as an intern had afforded me an opening into these job prospects where I could use my political science degree. However, the area of campaigning seemed most exhilarating to me and as it was a presidential election year, I thought I wanted to get my feet wet on a political campaign. Congressman Skaggs' scheduler Carla Lucero and I became fast friends and her family was entrenched in the Colorado Democratic party with her father preparing a run for U.S. Senate. She

introduced me to Mike Stratton who was a whirling dervish of energy. He was fast-moving, gruff, and worked harder than anyone I had known. He made the world of political consulting look frantic, stimulating, highly volatile and exciting and I wanted to use my knowledge in American government and work on political campaigns. He seemed to have a connection with every matter in Colorado politics and knew every person and key player in the state and nationwide. I told him I'd like to work in political consulting and he told me to contact him after graduation.

I continued to work in David Skaggs' office until the end of the semester answering the phones, scanning news media and flagging anything that mentioned David and interacting with the DC staff. As I reflect on that period of my college education of balancing my political science courses and work experience, I can now see the overall connection between my studying political science and working in a legislative office. I was learning to work as a team player as I was the constituents' first point of contact and how I handled their phone call was a reflection of the staff and the Congressman Skaggs. Many of my political science classes and foreign language classes asked us to work collaboratively for team projects and class discussions and we were accountable to each other. I had worked as a team in the classroom and was carrying those skills over to my internship. I had learned to operate where I sought out opinions of others and incorporated that input into a completed project. One of the most important skills I developed, probably later than I should have, was time management. I had to balance my classes and necessary schoolwork with my internship and this required looking at my day and carving out specific times to do my work. Previously my time didn't have any restrictions and taking on this internship required me to work out a schedule for how to

manage my time effectively. I recall at the beginning of my freshman year one of the advisors telling us that students who hold jobs are mostly more successful as students than students who don't hold jobs. The reason he attributed was that students who know they have only a finite amount of time to get their schoolwork done, manage their time more efficiently as they know their day isn't wide open to procrastinate. This was beginning to make sense to me and continues to make sense today. Also in my coursework, I had honed my skills in writing both as a former journalism major and within many of classes at CU. I had done research papers, composed biographies on historical figures, written about literature, and even did minor news reporting for the CU radio station. All of these skills I was honing as a student were translating into my work as an intern for David Skaggs. Though I didn't craft any letters or speeches for David Skaggs' I did draft inter-office memos to the staff and I was terrified of appearing juvenile or unintelligent.

As an upperclassman, I had spent the last several semesters in smaller classrooms getting to know my professors and becoming more comfortable visiting them during office hours to ask questions about the lectures or simply speaking up in class and being accountable for my work. I could no longer hide behind a large class with hundreds of students such as my Microeconomics class in Chem 140. Unbeknownst to me I was sharpening my skills in public speaking and interacting with professionals and pushing through the uncomfortable hurdles of going from college student to working professional.

Once the spring semester ended and my peers graduated and moved to the cities where their careers would begin, I moved back home to San Francisco and began a job search knowing that political consulting was the goal.

By the end of the summer after graduation, Michael Dukakis became the Democratic nominee and George H.W. Bush was the Republican candidate. Though I had sent out my resumes to the Dukakis campaign I learned that in the world of political campaigns there is a finite amount of financing and that the campaigns typically begin hiring their campaign staff after their respective conventions and use the money to hire grass roots operators all over the country. As I had kept in touch with the consultants at Stratton, Reiter, and Dupree, Rick Reiter, one of the name partners, referred me to the California campaign consultant for the Dukakis campaign. Through my connections with Stratton, Reiter and Dupree I interviewed and was hired to be a field coordinator for Michael Dukakis for President in Northern California. Within two months of my internship ending with David Skaggs, I had my first job out of college doing political campaigning, a niche industry which was unfamiliar to me only months before. My serendipitous encounter with a college friend on campus who informed me of his internship with David Skaggs only six months prior, had now turned into my first job out of college and I would use my political science background combined with my hands on



intern experience.

I was told that my job would start after Labor Day and we would begin canvassing the state working to win California for Dukakis. However, when I called to

thank Rick Reiter for his referral to the Dukakis campaign he said, “Well, here’s the deal. I’ll double your salary if you’ll quit the Dukakis campaign and come work for me. I need you to move to Fresno tomorrow and work for a Proposition that Clint Reilly and I have been hired to run.” Rick was in California on a contract basis working for a highly-lucrative campaign paid for by the insurance companies of California called Prop 104. Rick Reiter was working closely with Clint Reilly, a well known political consultant in San Francisco and I would get more experience working on the political consulting side than working as a field operator for the Dukakis campaign. I called the Dukakis campaign to resign before I even started and needless to say it was not well-received. As a young 22-year-old, I experienced for the first time how manic, cut-throat, and demanding political campaigning was going to be and quite frankly was surprised at myself. I was attracted to the money and the Clint Reilly name and wanted to observe the daily workings of his political consulting firm.

Clint Reilly was the most prominent and well-established political consultant in California during the 1980’s and he was recognized in the industry as the most savvy, creative, successful, and expensive. He was renowned for working for many Democrats such as Barbara Boxer, Dianne Feinstein, and Nancy Pelosi. If you wanted Clint Reilly to run your campaign, you had to fundraise but he was going to run a fierce campaign and most of the time, win. Clint had been hired to run an insurance initiative for California to combat Ralph Nader and Harvey Rosenfeld’s ballot measure which would reduce insurance rates. Clint worked hard at opposition mailers against his opponents and his direct mail pieces were creative and at times humorous. He was the renowned political consultant and as I later worked in public relations well after political consulting I

connected with many people whose first jobs were with Clint Reilly. We all agreed that we got our thick-skins from working for Clint.

As Rick Reiter instructed, I made the three hour drive down to Fresno to begin work as a political consultant for Prop 104. I hit the ground running, coordinating the phone banks, precinct walking, polling, and running the day-to-day operations of the Prop 104 campaign and my job was to make sure that Prop 104 won in my district. This was my first job out of college and it required me to think on my feet, react quickly, and learn how to argue one side of an issue.

Whereas my studies as a political science major helped me in my internship, the skills I honed during my internship were now being used in political consulting. Clint and his staff were incredibly demanding and the campaign work involved late hours running phone banks and running poll numbers. I was surrounded by many unmarried or divorced men and women who devoted their lives to campaigning and all the demands of the campaign lifestyle. They traveled to wherever the next campaign took them, slept on floors of church basements while precinct walking for a candidate and they lived for the excitement and for the win.

As expected, that campaign ended in huge defeat, though the proposition did win in the Fresno district. Assuming I would begin working for the next campaign I didn't realize at the time that working on political campaigns is a seasonal job. Unless you are hired as a permanent staff member of a political consultant, you are unemployed after an election and won't be hired again until the consultant gets a new campaign to run. And so began a career of off and on campaign work which proved to be unpredictable and hard to maintain a consistent lifestyle. I bounced from campaign to campaign working

again in Fresno and San Francisco and living as only a young, single person can live. Staying in friends' apartments, living in hotels, or going back home to my parents.

After several years working for Clint Reilly, I contacted Rick Reiter and asked if he had any campaigns for me and typical of Rick he said, "Sure! Be here in Denver tomorrow for a 10:00 a.m. meeting. We are working for the new Denver Airport and you can run our field operations." And then he was off the phone probably proofing a direct mail piece with a cigarette in his mouth. I jumped in my car and made the 16-hour drive in time for the morning staff meeting. I was surrounded by new and familiar faces from my internship with David Skaggs and was immediately put to work to build up excitement for the new Denver Airport. As I had learned in college, Denver had been suffering from a years-long recession as a result of the oil and gas industry leaving the region. Geographically Denver was an ideal spot to act as a major hub for airlines yet Stapleton, the old airport was too small and because of its size limit, if there was a weather delay, air traffic was delayed. Government leaders in Denver such as Mayor Federico Pena wanted to build a new airport to bring business to Denver by allowing more airport jobs and attracting more airline hubs. Denver voters were open to anything that promised to revitalize their economy and this campaign was bi-partisan and well-funded. Once again I was in charge of working fundraising and awareness events, organizing volunteers, and getting out the vote on election day.

Working on this campaign was yet another connection to my courses at CU. In classes such as Political Theory and American History, we had analyzed how the American government was established in a way that allows its citizens to make changes or enact legislation using a democratic majority rule process. Whereas my previous

campaigns had been for a candidate or a proposition, this campaign felt like we were working towards having a positive and direct impact on people's lives. Our campaign had an emotional connection where Denver's economy could recover bringing new business to the state and there was excitement with this campaign. To me it felt like a purely American government procedure to allow citizens to vote for something which they felt they needed and would improve their lives.

Stratton, Reiter and Dupree were the political consultants for this campaign and along with Governor Roy Romer and Mayor Federico Pena this campaign easily won. As I wanted to remain in Denver after this campaign I was able to continue working for Governor Roy Romer's re-election campaign as well as a permanent job with the Colorado Democratic Party.

One of the first events I had to work as the new Director of Development for the Colorado Democratic Party was the party's largest fundraiser of the year called the Jefferson Jackson Dinner. One of the first attendees to the event was Congressman Skaggs who happily greeted me.

Conclusion

As I am touring colleges with my high school senior daughter, I am struck by how many schools emphasize students taking on internships during their time at college and I can appreciate all the benefits they list. I am in awe of how many opportunities today's college students have before them and how connected they are through social media and technology and I feel this can only assist them in opening doors for finding careers.

However, sitting at the UMC and talking with a college peer about a recent internship and encouraging them to apply seems like another excellent means for finding a career as this path worked for me.

I feel indebted to CU and particularly the late Professor Rozek for his inspiration. He taught us gratitude for our country's ideals and freedoms and how we can make a difference at a local level such as working as an intern for a local congressman. I was a wandering but hopeful college senior and CU's political science department prepared me for a work experience that would change my life.

