

Testimonial

A Lawyer, a Rocket Scientist and an International Trade Specialist Go to Capitol Hill.

An interview with 2007 Legis Congressional Fellows Ann Strickland, Miguel Hernandez and Phil Fawcett.

By Rachel Flynn

It sounds like the beginning of a bad joke: What do a lawyer, a rocket scientist and an international trade specialist have in common? They were probably asking themselves the same thing as they sat through their orientation for the Legis Congressional Fellowship. Described by Department of Commerce employee Miguel Hernandez as “Legislative branch boot camp,” the two-week orientation prepares a new class of Legis Fellows for their seven- or twelve-month placements on Capitol Hill.

Each fellowship period begins with an intensive two-week orientation on the operations and organization of Congress conducted by Brookings staff and experts on congressional affairs. Once they have sorted through their offers and settled on a committee or member office in which to spend their fellowship, Brookings Legis Fellows participate in projects that are both substantive and wide-ranging, and may include drafting legislation; briefing Members of Congress for votes; participating in committee hearings; or interacting with constituents, businesses, trade associations, lobbyists or public interest groups.

“I’m lucky to be working for a committee with jurisdiction over so many different issues, and I’ve been excited to see how processes and procedures, considered mysterious and complicated to outsiders, really work on the Hill” says Ann Strickland, an attorney in the Environmental Protection Agency’s office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance. Strickland first thought about becoming a Legis fellow after a colleague called the experience the “highlight of her career.” Ann quickly sold the EPA on the idea, explaining the benefits of her participation in the program, and found a placement with the House Committee on Energy and Commerce.

Ann recalls her work on a team of member and committee staff to draft a bill addressing the dangers of mercury that was passed by the House. Though she was obviously a critical member of the team behind the success of this bill, Ann mentions the names of several staffers from both sides of the aisle. She pauses after each one to make sure I’ve gotten it down, explaining that they all “deserved credit and were a privilege to work with.” Her time on Capitol Hill has crafted Ann into a true Hill staffer.

Reflecting on what she's learned during her time as a Legis fellow, Ann says, "There are a lot of small things that the executive branch can do to create a more productive relationship with the Congress, even if it's just understanding how talented and hardworking these people are, and being reminded that we're all working towards the same goal—to serve the public."

Also benefiting from a greater understanding of the "human" side of Congress is Legis fellow Miguel Hernandez. When his work with the U.S. Department of Commerce brought him overseas, Hernandez was struck by the criticism he heard of U.S. economic policy from environmental, labor and human rights groups. A position in Congress, Miguel reasoned, would broaden his perspective and help him understand how to build stronger relationships with NGOs when formulating U.S. trade policy.

As Miguel says, "My Legis placement in Senator Barbara Boxer's office has allowed me to work directly on U.S. trade policy issues – my own area of expertise – and also branch out into issues like defense and foreign policy." During the October 2007 demonstrations in Myanmar, Miguel was involved in setting up an emergency hearing and drafting legislation to increase the efficacy of U.S.-led sanctions against the Burmese government. This meant meeting with industry experts, analysts and NGO representatives, and working across the aisle to introduce a viable bill before the December recess. Of his work in Senator Boxer's office, Miguel says, "I am working with people I typically never encountered at Commerce and will come away from this understanding my own field so much better because I've really engaged a broader cross-section of stakeholders."

Phil Fawcett came to the Legis program from a different direction. Working at the Aerospace Corporation, where his daily job rarely, if ever, brought him in touch with Capitol Hill, Phil's interest in Capitol Hill was mostly personal. But his persistence – and willingness to go straight to the top of the organization to make his case – landed him a Legis fellowship. He explains, "The value of sending a guy like me up to Capitol Hill wasn't going to be immediately obvious to my company, and I knew I had to win over some pretty important people. I made appointments with all the vice presidents [at the Aerospace Corporation] and made my case." Slightly sarcastically, Phil thanks the Legis program for "sending [him] on more interviews in two weeks than in the rest of [his] life." When he walked into the office of Rep. Tim Ryan (D-OH) to meet with the chief of staff, Phil was ushered unexpectedly into the Congressman's office to speak directly with Rep. Ryan. Unprepared though he says he was, he was hired on the spot, disproving his fear that, as someone with a Ph.D. in Aerospace Engineering, he would be "typecast" and only able to find positions working in technology, science or space.

Phil describes how his typical day as a Legis fellow differs from his day job at home: "In my world, I might interact with 10 or 15 people on a daily basis at most. This morning [in Rep. Ryan's office], my first meeting was with a group of elderly women from a garden club in our district, then I spoke with grassroots activists about protecting a species of rare beetle, and before lunch I spoke to local businessmen about railcar issues. Working here, I meet brand-new people four times a day."

Phil says, "My experiences interacting with many different constituencies, learning issues, and learning how to ask truly penetrating questions will help me immeasurably when I go back to my regular job." Not to mention that the talking points Phil prepared for Rep. Ryan on a recent currency bill were used in a CNN interview. "Watching Rep. Ryan using my talking points on the air was a real thrill," Phil says. Even for a rocket scientist.