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A position of power

Washington, D.C., interns learning the ins and outs of Capitol life

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The Salt Lake Tribune
Salt Lake Tribune

Article Last Updated: 10/26/2006 04:00:50 PM MDT

WASHINGTON - Mike Steck is still awed by where he works. The granite domes, the soaring columns, the immense power wielded by those around him.

Watching a rally on immigration recently outside the Capitol, Steck says it was an amazing experience.

"It just hit home how real this is and where I live," Steck says.

Same for Kristen Almerico, who is astonished by her surroundings.

"It's great," she says. "The whole political scene; all the history."

Steck and Almerico, both of Sandy, are two of several Utah interns getting hands-on experience working for Congress, the U.S. Supreme Court or one of a variety of other government or public-policy organizations.

It's a chance to be on the front row of history, watching American democracy up close.

Steck is working for Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah, while Almerico is working for Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah. Both say their experiences have been exciting. Walking in the halls of Congress, living in the capital city, seeing the federal government at work.

"I saw Hillary Clinton," says Almerico, 20. "She's like a celebrity."

Steck and Almerico are students at the University of Utah and are part of an internship program run by the Hinckley Institute of Politics. The two started working in Washington Aug. 24.

Steck works for Bennett in two jobs: in the morning, he assists the press secretary with writing news releases, transcribing speeches and searching for mentions of the senator; In the afternoon, he helps a staffer working on Defense Department, veterans affairs and transportation issues.

Working on Defense issues has a certain cache for Steck, who is in the Utah National Guard and was serving in Kuwait when terrorists attacked New York and Washington on Sept. 11, 2001.

"It's interesting to see the behind-the-scenes action," Steck says. One item affected Steck directly: a 2.2 percent pay hike for military personnel Bennett helped push through.

In Hatch's office, Almerico assists with economic reports and health issues, along with helping to track bills and doing paperwork on getting co-sponsors for legislation.

"I wanted to kind of see what path I'd like to take," Almerico says of her interest in working in Washington. Halfway through her stint, Almerico is pretty sure she wants to get an advanced degree, but she isn't sure in what subject.

The experience has been big for her. "I've learned so much, I don't know where to start," she says when asked about her most exciting time so far.

It's been tough for both to live in Washington, a metropolitan area of 5 million people that revolves around politics. Steck is a big fan of camping, something that's not easy to do when you're carless and relying on mass transit. He did serve his LDS Church mission in Tokyo, so he's used to riding an underground train to work.

Almerico was surprised to see that no one inside the Beltway actually rides the escalators. They always walk or run down the moving stairs. She was even more shocked to see a man steal a bike in broad daylight by sawing through a chain.

"I wasn't going to say anything," she says. "He had a saw!"

Overall, both interns say their time in Washington has been great for their education. And the mystique of the Capitol has yet to wear off.

"Sometimes," Steck says, "I have to remember how much power and influence is in just this building."

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