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Internship Essay

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For the 499 requirement, in 2018, I interned with the J.D. Scholten campaign for congress. J.D. ran as a democrat against the incumbent republican, Steve King. In the 4th district for which he was contending, J.D. had 6 offices. I worked out of the Ames office, which doubled as a democratic headquarters for all local races.

Campaigning is a rigorous world. I understand now why possible candidates must evaluate the pros and cons with family members before undertaking such a task as running for office. For once the race is on, life becomes a kind of wind tunnel for those who are part of the team. Every second counts to be able to reach as many people as possible, to deliver the message of what the candidate stands for. The paid members of the team work long hours and late hours. They might perhaps, get one half-day off a week. This schedule continues for months and months, especially with a candidate like J.D., who had to work gruelingly to get his name out to the public.

According to MSNBC, at the time of the 2018 race, in the 4th district, there were approximately 180,000 registered republican voters, while there approximately 120,000 registered democratic voters. With this knowledge, the fact that J.D. took on this demographic at all fills my heart with awe. I still feel it. In the end, with a margin of 3.4 percent, he came closer than any opponent who took on Steve King, winning Woodbury county to boot (another first for a King opponent). J.D. also dominated in Story County, with 64.8 percent of the vote.

In describing the organization for which I am have interned, in this context it feels appropriate to describe the candidate I interned for, as well as his vision.

J.D Scholten modeled his campaign after his two political heroes, Berkley Bedell and Tom Harkin. According to J.D., these two men made it a point to get out there and engage with constituents, so he wanted to do the same. J.D. purchased a Winnebago and did 3 consecutive

tours of all 39 counties in the 4th district. He often opened with the line, “I start off every town hall by telling folks this stat: the average person in Congress is 58 years old with a net worth of a million dollars,” Scholten says. “I’m different. I’m 20 years younger, and I’m about a million dollars short of that average.”

J.D. Scholten grew up in Sioux City, Iowa. He spent time on his grandparents’ family farm and loved to play baseball. He loved playing ball so much that he was able to make a career out of it in the United States and Europe. Rolling Stone quoted him regarding his playing in relation to health care, an issue that would become a cornerstone of his campaign. “I chased a dream playing minor league baseball, but I never made a dime in my life. So, when it comes to health care, I tell them in my off-seasons of my baseball career, I would find two part-time jobs while trying to train full time, and at a time when I was maximizing my body, I often didn’t have health insurance.”

It is true that this race has garnered national attention due to the inflammatory and xenophobic attitude of Steve King. The current congressman has drawn major attention with his endorsement of Neo-Nazi sympathizers as well as with tweets like, ““We can’t restore our civilization with somebody else’s babies.” Shortly after the 2016 election, J.D. decided to run against King. He was participating in the Women’s March with some friends in Seattle, where he was working as a paralegal. He witnessed the sheer size of the movement, as well as families participating together to make a difference. “It was in this moment of clarity that I realized the most meaningful thing in my life is my family and where I am from. I am defined by my Iowa roots. And it was standing there across from the Seattle downtown library while feeling the passion of the march that I decided that it’s time for me to move back home to Iowa. And it was time for me to fight,” He said.

This essay may sound a bit like a campaign ad, but its true-I became a believer. I met J.D. personally on multiple occasions and I was struck by what many have described is his everydayness kind of persona. I have been most touched by his unique combination of mildness and tenacity, his empathy, and most of all, his genuine determination to talk with all

denominations on the political spectrum, while often winning them over. I was personally stirred by his garage chats that he did with his republican neighbor, posting them on Facebook.

My own involvement with the campaign began in the deep winter of 2018. I was covering the democratic caucus for a journalism photography class here at ISU. During the caucus, I was approached by the Deputy Campaign Manager, Todd Prieb. He asked if I would like to take photos for the campaign for an internship.

It felt like a good fit for me. I have a passion for politics and found that I had been enjoying the class on journalism photography. Most of my time at Iowa State had been focused on video production, though I kept wondering how a person could have better control over the quality of the picture. It was a lovely experience to learn about the deeper aspects of photography, and this internship would be a wonderful continuation of that exploratory exercise. Not to mention, to be a part of a campaign that aligns with my personal values is also very gratifying.

My role as a photographer for the campaign was to take pictures at events for posting on social media. I attended fairs, parades, town halls, fundraisers, and political rallies. It was of course important to have the pictures processed in a timely manner, as the news cycle of the campaign was updating daily. The contact to receive my photos was the event coordinator for the campaign, Sam Muhr.

I also spent time working in the office under the direction the field organizer, Erica Young. For her I helped to organize volunteers, record data in the VAN program, conduct voter outreach through phone calls and door-knocking as well as other odds and ends.

All my classes in journalism have given me a respect for the reality of hard deadlines.

Multiple classes in video media have taught me to have patience and a preparedness when using technology.

Specifically, the photojournalism class with Diane Bugeja has been a remarkable introduction to camera use and theory. The practice of critiquing in class was invaluable, to experience so much feedback on other students' work as well as my own. I was fortunate to be able to get a rudimentary understanding of the relationship between ISO, shutter speed and aperture of the camera. Diane assured us that although this relationship was a tricky concept to maneuver, we all would click with the information sooner or later. For me the click of understanding came during the internship when I was working in low lighting situations. I am grateful for the perspective that Mrs. Bugeja imparted to us in this matter, to trust that understanding would come with practice. I translated the peak moment idea from sports photography to politics, in order to catch an emotional expression, and hand shake, or a high five. I also worked to find photos that fit the theme of the event-to make sure that all relevant information could be included in one photo. Another element I took from class was to be bold in getting in close for the photo. This practice was aided by J.D. Scholten being somewhat used to and expecting to receive media attention. The fact that he knew I was on the team also made it a bit easier, although I pushed myself many times to ask for photos of people. My introduction to photoshop was invaluable in processing and correctly sizing photos. Furthermore, I took with me a sense of balance in setting up a frame that had also learned to do in the video classes with Jeff Ames. Finally, a lot of photos were taken at each event to ensure that I would find a good shot.

It has been frustrating not to be able to figure out the back button focus on my camera. There have been instructors who have tried to assist me, but my camera is a bit of a mystery on this point. I am continuing to search for answers on this.

Interning with the J.D. Scholten campaign has been a rare opportunity. It basically fell out of the sky and I feel blessed for it. When Todd approached me to consider doing photography for the campaign, I was hopeful that I could meet their standards even with only the one photography class under my belt. There were other people on the team who would take photos at events, often with cell phones. I learned quickly to imitate the shots that showed the size of the room and the crowd, in order to show the building momentum.

The climate of a campaign office is an interesting mixture of monotony with bursts of excitement. Much of the day to day grind for all on the team include endless amounts of phone calls. Phone calls for setting up events, phone calls for advertising, phone calls to the media, phone calls to analyze events, phone calls for fundraising, phone calls to voters, and more phone calls to voters. Being an introvert, it was a challenge to say the least, to start cold calling people in order to get their opinion on an upcoming election. At the beginning, before each phone call, I would clutch the phone, take a deep breath, and whisper, "America." It took many hours, but I did get to a point where I could dial like a pro and without much forethought. It always was a little uncomfortable, but it became easier when we had a group calling together. Although most of the calls proved to be unanswered, I ended up having some unique conversations. Getting to those conversations could be a bit harrowing of course. It was a bit daunting if someone hung up on you, or worse, you started into your spiel and *then* they hung up. I was always trying to find

the right balance between getting our message out while being as human as possible. It was frustrating because the script handed down from the higher ups often sounded like an infomercial. I butted heads a few times with my supervisor(s), because I am not a natural salesman. My conscience compelled me to refuse to say certain things or approach people too aggressively. One, because I found the aggressive approach to be unethical. Two, I found it to be ineffective. I thought back to Mr. Bugeja's class and our discussion on the conscience. He mentioned a Native American allegory, wherein the conscience is like a sharp stone in your heart that moves around and makes you feel uncomfortable. But the thing is, if you don't listen to it, it becomes smooth and then you don't feel it at all. The other quote that came to my mind was one by Jon Stewart. He said, "If you don't stick to your values when they're being tested, they're not values: they're hobbies." I felt a great need to listen to the stone in my heart during those phone calls. I knew that it was a risk to challenge certain supervisors on this, I wondered if it could cost me the internship. Ultimately, I decided to stick to my guns. The first supervisor surprisingly enough did not confront me on my stance. Later, a visiting replacement supervisor (who from my perspective had much more experience) agreed with me. My final supervisor, Erica, also challenged me somewhat on that front, although we were able to work out a compromise.

As I have mentioned in the evaluation, although it is recommended that I have a supervisor who can provide feedback on the details of my photography work, in this case, I have profited from having the freedom to follow my own course and counsel. The contrast of working outdoor events juxtaposed to indoor events has helped me to pursue and better understand the core element of the camera, which is the relationship between the aperture, ISO and shutter speed. The challenge of low lighting coffee houses beckoned me to keep trying different settings and to

search out better ways to prepare for those situations. When I discovered the guideline of using the lowest aperture setting for low lighting situations, I was able to understand better how to play with ISO and shutter speed to mitigate the light in a somewhat dark room. This knowledge has given me more confidence in the employment of my camera.

The other challenge that I enjoyed during the campaign was in finding the peak moment. It usually occurred in a handshake or moment of affection. I remember a time when I was frustrated trying to work with both issues of lighting and peak moment-when John Paschen gave a gracious speech after losing the primary to J.D. I felt the importance of that moment when John presented J.D. with a funding check. Most of my photos of that moment were blurry. But another moment in Mason City was caught by my camera outside in front of the Winnebago. I was able to capture the special relationship with one of our organizers, Tahmyrah Lytle, and J.D. Scholten. She wanted a picture with him and I felt that I captured the joy beyond the regular pose, when she and the others in the photo were sharing a laugh together. My ultimate peak moment was caught during RAGBRAI. J.D. had a frame that he was using as a prop for photos for anyone who was interested. Many bicyclists were thrilled to take part in a photo-op. We also happened to have a “dogs for Scholten” Facebook page. So, when a bicyclist came along with a dog in tow, I was able to snap the perfect shot of the dog rising to give J.D. a kiss. The photo had the frame, the expression of the dog owner, and other cyclists in the background against the road. All the information was there.

All in all, I feel fortunate to participated in the J.D. Scholten campaign during what I perceive as a time of political unrest. Being part of a team for someone who I view as having a vision to make life better for everyday people, has been a unique privilege.

Everyday I went to the office and saw people with passion in their hearts, who were willing to work hard to make things better. I met so many volunteers who were willing to knock door and make phone calls, to reach out into the unknown, to see if they could make a connection with a stranger.

This campaign has also been a time of new experiences and surprises. I got to walk in a number of parades, taking shots of J.D.'s affectionate high fives with kids. It has been a joy to meet Democratic Chair, Jan Bauers as well as Story County Supervisor Elect, Linda Murken. I also got to meet Congressman Eric Swalwell, and Senator Cory Booker (who was kind enough to do a PSA with me after I told him that I was urging my friends to vote). I even got to watch Ben Cohen (of Ben and Jerry's) scoop up ice cream for supporters, as well as spending a whole day taking photos of Bernie Sanders. Over the period of almost a year, I got to witness the kind of stamina it takes to create and cultivate a campaign for Congress.

Overall, think a student in my position would appreciate a more clear-cut outline of duties to be performed before the job is accepted, but at the same time, working on a campaign is to work on a particular kind of industry. This giant ship is launched with full speed, and everyone is just trying to catch up with this thing they created, all the time. Trying to steer it and manage ups and downs and crises with fluctuating boredom and high excitement. People work crazy hours. They assign you a post and you are running with everyone else. When you work an internship with a campaign, you do what you came to do, but you also do what is needed to make everyone's life easier, to keep the ship sailing smooth over the chaos. I am grateful and honored for this experience.

Connections

J.D. Scholten---candidate

Todd Prieb—Deputy Campaign Manager

Sam Muhr—Event Coordinator

Erica Young—Field Organizer

Tahmyrah Lytle—Field Organizer

Taylor Blair---President of ISU Dems

Sydney Throop—Reason to Believe

Dennis Goodrich—Videographer

Jan Bauer—Story County Democratic Chair

Linda Murken—Story County Supervisor

Vanessa Burnett---Advocate/Entrepreneur

*Many wonderful volunteers

