

WHEN I WAS A WHITE HOUSE INTERN (NO, THE PRESIDENT DIDN'T HIT ON ME)

Erin Garvey

Writer's comment: Ever since my internship, I have wanted a chance to respond to the image of D.C. packaged for us by the media. The staff I met at the White House were impressive people. They sacrificed time, energy, and money to put their mark on the world. Working at the White House did have its perks in terms of prestige, but my own stereotypes and cynicism regarding public servants were reformed by witnessing their dedication to the job. Writing this under the guidance of Jayne Walker was my opportunity to challenge the *Hard Copy* image of Washington. Without her, I would not have submitted this essay to *Prized Writing*. She has done much for my confidence as a writer.

— *Erin Garvey*

Instructor's comment: Erin Garvey's recent White House internship provided a wealth of material for English 104C (Feature Article Writing). The challenge was finding a form and a focus. Erin knew that Monica Lewinsky, the notorious former White House intern, was her obvious "hook." But as the scandal still smouldered, she wanted to emphasize the earnest intensity of the unglamorous young White House staffers. Once she decided to begin the piece by rendering her frustration with the press coverage that was debasing this experience she treasured, the final draft snapped into shape, with a clear focus and a powerful "point."

When I suggested that Erin submit her article to *Prized Writing*, she laughed and said, "I guess maybe I shouldn't have taken the class pass-not pass." I was amazed. Because she worked so hard, simply for her own satisfaction, I admire her accomplishment all the more.

— *Jayne L. Walker, English Department*

I PRESS THE PLAYBACK BUTTON ON MY MESSAGE MACHINE. “So, Erin, exactly what was it you were doing in Washington?” I groan, and anticipate that the next seven messages are more of the same. I head downstairs, where a roommate had already monopolized the TV and am greeted with “Hey, Erin, your boy’s in trouble!” On every channel is the same picture, a heavysset brunette named Monica flashing this hopeful smile.

I had a very different White House internship from Monica Lewinsky’s. Mine came and went without too much national coverage. But I do understand Lewinsky’s awe of power. Though I was most impressed by all the people who worked so hard in D.C., I too was dazzled by the famous personages populating the city. It was hard not to be. Your neighbor might head negotiations for peace in the Middle East. Janet Reno might hold open a door for you. The people filling the town were more than celebrities, they were influencing our future and the fate of nations.

On the day of the Vice President’s birthday, his staff threw him a party. All staff were invited, including lowly interns like me. I had not yet met the Vice President, and there was a rumor the President might show up. Finally I would have a chance to meet the man in command. Walking into the Indian Treaty Room, where the party was to be held, I scoped out the best spot to stand for a presidential encounter. I squeezed next to the birthday cake, figuring the Vice President had to stand there at some point, and I waited. I tried to appear outwardly calm, as if I go to these things all the time. I didn’t want to seem too excited to the neurotic Secret Service, or remind a hard-hearted staffer of work needing to be done. But inside, my heart was pumping.

Suddenly, the doors swung open and the Vice President casually strode in, smiling. The doors opened again, and President Clinton swung in on his crutches, followed by the First Lady. Despite my efforts at nonchalance, my smile was jumping into my ears. Hillary Clinton presented a birthday greeting she had learned in an African tribal village. She gave a trilling yodel, then ran over to the Vice President and dumped a bowl of popcorn on his head. The room was roaring as Al Gore stood laughing with popcorn in his hair and Clinton wiped the tears from his eyes. I was thrilled to be witnessing this goofy behavior.

Then the Vice President went to cut his cake, right next to me. He turned, smiling, and asked if I wanted some. I thought, Do I?!! Oh, Yeah!! How Cool!! - which came out as a “thank you.” Looking up from the piece of cake the Vice President had just handed me, I saw the President hobbling towards me on his crutches. Leaning on one crutch, he stuck out his hand to shake mine. He asked me if I liked the burritos we were munching on, adding that Burrito Brothers, the caterer, had helped him and Al through many a long working night. This was one of those moments that can really center an ego. I had a once in a lifetime opportunity to tell the most powerful man in the world something momentous and ended up discussing Tex-Mex.

In Washington D.C., there are plenty of opportunities to go totally gaga over somebody important, but this isn’t where the real action is. Opportunities abound for a young person to work hard and make an impact. In the Vice President’s Domestic Policy Office, where I had my internship, worked five individuals who were extremely bright, and had little in the way of social lives. They were all under thirty, earned little money, and would consistently work until midnight. What they received in return for their hard work was an opportunity to put their energy into influencing issues that were significant to them. Toby, a young woman in my office, helped work on the tobacco settlement talks with the vice president. She would receive compliments or sympathy each time an article about the progress of the tobacco deal appeared in the *Washington Post*. At only twenty-four, she was given the opportunity to affect the health of the nation.

Erik, who also worked in my office, was simultaneously on the phone and the computer from nine in

the morning to eleven at night. Occasionally, he would receive a call from constituents who wished to tell the Vice President that they were poor and needed his help, to share their policy suggestions, or to say that they had been abducted by aliens and needed to report vital galactic information. Erik would spend time talking to each of these callers until they felt some sense of relief, despite the fact that his desk always seemed to be sagging under the weight of his work. He told me that callers took comfort from talking to someone officially working for the Vice President.

At the beginning of my first week, Erik asked me if I'd noticed the difference between phoning the general public and making calls within the White House bureaucracy. I knew exactly what he meant. When calling a regular citizen in response to questions they had sent, I received quite a reaction from my introductions: "This is the White House calling for Bob Smith," or "Good afternoon, this is the Office of the Vice President calling for Rhonda." I could hear the suppressed excitement in a muffled voice saying, "Bob! the Vice President's Office is on the phone for you!" Even big-time CEOs seemed a little intimidated when I called to set up a meeting between them and one of my office heads. I remember thinking, God, if they only knew who they were really talking to.

My phone calls within the White House bureaucracy were a different story altogether. These people knew better. They were not impressed by my introductions because they were all working for impressive sounding offices themselves. Office of the Vice President meant squat to them unless it was the Vice President himself on the phone. They knew I was an intern, because only an intern would be given the task of trying to locate more printer paper. My phone inquiries were frequently answered by one word and a click. Everyone was busy in the White House, but there were some who carried it a little too far. It was hard for me to see how a word like "bye" could put them behind schedule.

D.C. was a stimulating place, but the work pace was unlike anything I had experienced back in California. In my internship I was surrounded by people working at full throttle, certain that where they were was the most important place to be. I had the feeling that if the District of Columbia broke off from the mainland and floated out to sea, no one in D.C. would stop running in time to their pagers or care enough to get off their cell phones and computers.

Absorbed into the flow of work, I began moving at a frenetic pace. My mornings began with a mad dash onto the subway. I quickly learned that attempting this in high heels was foolhardy and dangerous. I once saw a lady go down as her heel caught between the train and the platform. It actually stuck, and some men struggled to unjam her foot before the train started moving. From that day on I wore flat shoes. Every morning I would cram onto the subway with other suited figures and grab onto the metal pole to keep from swinging onto the lap behind me. At my stop the doors would slide open and everyone would pile out, then pile onto the tight escalators. Stuffed onto the escalator, I would think, wow, so this is the rat race! How long can people do this?

After the first week I decided I'd had enough of blisters and aching feet, and I would smuggle my sneakers into work. The White House maintained a very strict code of dress. I prayed my *faux pas* would go unnoticed. No one remarked, so it seems they let me get away with it. But by the fourth week, my adjustment became more problematic. I developed mononucleosis and could barely deliver a fax without wheezing. After one particularly hectic day of answering phones, running deliveries, searching offices and libraries for information, filing, and running up and down those unforgiving marble stairs, I put my head down on the desk and swore I would never get up. Washington had worn me down very quickly. Here I was, totally motivated, inspired, surrounded by dedication and energy - and completely exhausted.

Any retelling of my intern experience inevitably echoes a double meaning. When I describe Clinton telling me how appreciative he is of the interns' hard work, I know I'll hear "I bet he is" and giggles in reply. Merely saying that I was a White House intern elicits titters and snickers. I do get the joke. But I know that the character of the White House staff can't be encapsulated in the image of one ambitious

brunette because Toby and Erik worked there too. They might not make the 6 o'clock news, but the image of Erik's desk littered with the Coke cans he used as an energy source and the sound of Toby's heels slapping up and down the hall are what I think of when I remember D.C.