

A Page Changer

Young people engage with the legislature through a program like no other in Virginia.



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BY BLADEN FINCH

Eighty middle school students descend on Virginia's Capitol Square the second week of every January. The kids aren't on a field trip. They're a select group of students reporting for work as pages and messengers.

Bethany Gottschall was there this year to drop off her daughter Caroline. It was 18 years ago that Bethany herself served as a Senate page, and her return to the Capitol evoked fond memories of her service and an appreciation for the effort of Virginia's General Assembly to preserve the program.

"I think it is wonderful that the pages have this opportunity, and that the senators and staff dedicate their time to make this a possibility," says Gottschall.

Bladen Finch directs the Senate page program in Virginia and was a Senate messenger himself back in 1994.

Teaching Good Habits

Pages and messengers tackle hundreds of work assignments while navigating the halls in which Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, James Madison and other notable statesmen once walked. Staff members teach, encourage and mentor pages and messengers as they harness the concept of hard work, develop an ability to think critically, and develop job skills working alongside top government officials.

The Senate Clerk's Office conducts a two-day training session emphasizing responsibility and time management skills. The young people also learn about the tasks they will handle in the bill room, post office, clerk's office, public information offices and concierge desks. (House pages have similar responsibilities, including work in the governor's office.)

For Senate pages and messengers, the most anticipated assignment is working in the Senate chamber, where they prepare members' desks and often speak with tourists and visiting



Erin Flores and Barham Nardo prepare for the Senate Page/Messenger mock session. Flores was elected clerk by the class.

school groups.

“They are our legs, energy and enthusiasm,” says Susan Clarke Schaar, clerk of the Senate.

Pages and messengers hear testimony in committees from experts and ordinary citizens, and witness floor speeches and listen to debates on topics ranging from abortion to taxes. They discover that, like making sausage, the process is not always pretty. This is real life civics.

Select Group

What makes Virginia’s program different than others—about half the states have some type of page program—is that the young people stay in Richmond for the entire session.

In the hotel, chaperones keep an eye on etiquette and help teach some important lessons, such as the value of compromise when sharing a room. The students must get up on their own, dress in uniform, have breakfast and walk to the Capitol by 8:15 a.m. Roll call is taken, uniforms inspected, announcements given and assignments made.

Quitting time is 5 p.m.

Pages and messengers must be 13 or 14 years old. Applicants must have an A or B average and written permission from their school principals. They complete an application as well as write an essay.

On a rotating basis, senators choose 11 of the pages, while leaders appoint another five, including a page for the lieutenant governor. Senate messengers are appointed by the clerk of the Senate at the recommendation of senators who do not make an appointment that year. This results in about 34 young people serving in the Senate. In the House, the speaker makes the appointments, for a class of about 40.

Historic Role

Like parliamentary floor motions, the program has deep roots. The Virginia General Assembly, America’s oldest English-speaking representative assembly, has met in the present day Capitol since 1788. As early as 1848, nearly 100 years after the legislature convened in Thomas Jef-



Annual class photograph on the South Portico of the Capitol.

erson's "Temple on the Hill," the first mention of pages appears in the Senate and House journals.

"I felt like I was treading on hallowed ground," says Sallie Johnston, a teacher with Henrico County Public Schools, reflecting on her experiences as a page nearly 40 years ago. In 1970, she was the first female Senate page and "forming friendships took some time," she says, noting the resistance of the boys to the change.

"There's no way to teach government the way it is taught in this program. It is a remarkable experience," says Johnston.

Learning extends beyond normal work hours. Mandatory study hall each evening, complete with tutors, ensures these future leaders keep up with their studies.

The education extends even further. Senate pages and messengers are charged with completing a community service project and bi-weekly newsletter that is sent to staff, senators and parents. They tour local historic sites and museums to gain an appreciation of Virginia's rich culture and heritage.

Some of the best traditions include the annual reception at the Governor's Mansion and the Capitol Classic basketball game where pages and messengers cheer on senators, delegates and the governor. At St. John's Church, each

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class hears a re-enactment of Patrick Henry's "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" speech, containing many of the parliamentary motions still used today. And, toward the end of session, senators switch rolls with the pages and messengers for a lively mock legislature.

The program has a loyal cadre of veterans. They fill the Senate and House galleries every January with great memories of what the program meant to them.

"I knew Caroline would have a great experience," says Gottschall. Not only did her daughter gain maturity, she also "was able to look after herself and keep up with her school work."

It was a life-changing nine-week session. "She wanted to be a film director. Now, she talks about pursuing law and politics."

