

AAS Minor Cuts Teeth on Capitol Hill

Interview: Eronn Putman
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As a research assistant and undergraduate minor in African American Studies (AAS), Eronn Putman has that unique mix of intellectual keenness and gritty self-determination that all university faculty and staff prize in aspiring young students. Such strengths, which appear so self-evident in her character, have not gone without acknowledgment here at the University of Houston. For the past two years, Ms. Putman has received the Sylvester Turner Academic Excellence Award from AAS. Yet, her character and development as a student has given her something beyond that which the accumulation of accolades could offer, ultimately shaping and exposing Ms. Putman to her future career objective—life as a public servant.

From January to May 2008, Ms. Putman participated in the George Thomas “Mickey” Leland Congressional Internship Program coordinated through the University of Houston’s Center for Public Policy.

“I heard about it through my former academic advisor, Claudia Baba, who’s now working for the Houston Chapter of the World Affairs Council,” Putman recalls. “She brought it to my attention because I was always in [her] office looking for any new classes, visiting lectures, and just any new activities on campus.”

The internship program matches local college students with congressional representatives from the State of Texas, giving students an opportunity to observe and experience the obligations of public officials on a national level. In 2008, the program selected interns from UH-Main Campus, UH-Downtown, Texas Southern University (TSU), and Thurgood Marshall School of Law at TSU. Ms. Putman worked in the office of Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee during her time in Washington, D.C. As Ms. Putman recalls of their first encounter, the congresswoman and her have a lot in common, including a voracious work ethic.

“The first time [that] I met Congresswoman Jackson-Lee it was a little bit intimidating, obviously, because she was actually really busy,” Putman said. “She was like, ‘I’m going meet you guys at a later date.’ That later date didn’t come until two weeks later. But when she met us, she just pretty much told us at the beginning that [her] office works hard.”

Despite the intense work pace demanded of the new recruits interning in the congresswoman’s office, Ms. Putman remained poised, accountable, and proactive during her time in the nation’s capitol. Her duties as an intern included drafting numerous floor speeches, memos, press releases, congressional resolutions, researching current and past policy issues, and monitoring various committee hearings.

“On my first day, I wrote a floor statement in recognition of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated honoring their hundredth year anniversary,” Putman states.

“Congresswoman Jackson Lee gave that speech on the floor of the house, which was an honor to me because I wrote that on my first day here.” “I did the research and it went in the congressional record.”

Ms. Putman also assisted in drafting three additional resolutions while interning on Capitol Hill. The resolutions honored former president Lyndon B. Johnson on the hundredth anniversary of his birthday, poet-novelist and scholar Maya Angelou on the occasion of her 80th birthday, and Specialist Monica Brown for bravery shown during combat operations in Iraq.

Still, the hard work and long hours that came with the internship were not without their benefit. Ms. Putman had a chance to meet several of the nation’s most admirable political leaders while in Washington, D.C, including Rep. Nancy Pelosi [D-Cal], Speaker of the House of Representatives; Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice; Martin Luther King, III; Senator John Kerry [D-Mass]; and, Rep. John Conyers [D-Mich], Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee.

From these encounters and her experience as an intern, Ms. Putman has gained an understanding of the various nuances that attend a career as a public servant. “It’s really hard. I sympathize with the representatives, senators, and even the president,” she says. “These public figures have the world on their shoulder, but will never please everyone [despite] having to make one decision that will change the lives of a lot of people.”

Ms. Putman comes away from the experience on a positive note, believing that she has made substantive contributions to serving the interests of her community.

“Just by being in Washington, D.C. and trying to write legislation, I felt that I was actually giving back. It’s a very big process, but by holding hearings and meetings, I felt like things were actually going somewhere.” And, throughout the process, Ms. Putman states, “Congresswoman Jackson Lee was like a mentor to me.”

Eronn Putman is an African American Studies minor looking to study law upon completion of her Bachelor of Science degree.