

Capitol-izing on Summer: OU's IPA Internship Program



IPA interns, summer 2008

If you're interested in catching a glimpse of the Orthodox Jewish world's future community leaders, come to Washington, DC, this summer.

For twenty summers and running, the Orthodox Union's (OU) Institute for Public Affairs (IPA) has been cultivating the next generation of community activists with its internship program. The program, which provides college-age students with the opportunity to work up close with the legislative movers and shakers in the nation's political hub, has proven to be a great investment for the career aspirations of these young men and women and for the future of the Orthodox community.

Each summer, an average of fifteen to fifty college juniors and seniors, hailing from Connecticut to California, participate in the eight-week program.

"It's a chance for [the interns] to take their idealism and put it into an

environment that transforms those ideas into policy and action," says Maury Litwack, deputy director of the IPA. "Summer interns are a valuable, huge component of Washington life and this is the only Orthodox presence for summer interns on Capitol Hill."

Chosen by a committee comprised of OU professionals and lay people, IPA interns, who must demonstrate leadership qualities, are assigned to congressional offices (from their own state, if possible) or political organizations such as the Republican Jewish Coalition, the National Jewish Democratic Council, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the Anti-Defamation League. Past interns have served Senators Chuck Schumer (D-NY), Joseph Lieberman (ID-CT) and Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), as well as Congressmen Eric Cantor (R-VA) and Jerrold Nadler (D-NY), among other high-level politicians. Their myriad tasks involve researching; speaking and responding to constituents; speech writing and attending congressional hearings.

"Our work was consequential," says Ariel Rotenberg, twenty-one, from Teaneck, New Jersey, a political science and history major at New York University who interned for Congressman Cantor this past summer. "[Rep. Cantor] used my research on housing for a debate on CNN."

Miriam Ambinder, twenty-one, of Monsey, New York, realized her goal of working in Washington for a Jewish cause by conducting research for Congressman Eliot Engel (D-NY) on the OU-supported Workplace Religious Freedom Act. The bill would amend current civil rights statutes to require employers to grant employees greater accommodations for religious observances. "I saw that we [as Orthodox Jews] *can* have an influence," says Ambinder, a political science and media studies major at Queens College in New York.

"The interns gain a real sense of appreciation for the American Jewish community's effect on political and communal issues in Washington," says Litwack. "These issues range from Is-

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rael to school choice to religious freedom. They see [the political process] at work and how the Jewish community plays a powerful role.”

“A highlight for me was seeing Congress in session on a day-to-day basis,” says Rotenberg, who plans to go into law. Rotenberg comes from an “IPA-internship family”; his older brothers Jeff, thirty-three, and Yoni, twenty-seven, now lawyers, both invested a summer in the program. Rotenberg’s duties included sitting in on Congressional hearings and delivering summaries to legislative assistants in the office. He also dealt with constituents, gleaning firsthand what

in finance at the University of Southern California. “We owe it to our parents and grandparents who suffered to ensure that the rights and freedoms we enjoy today are everlasting. My experience in DC left me with an understanding of how fortunate I am to live in the USA,” says Streit, who interned for the Republican Jewish Coalition this past summer.

Enriching the Washington Experience

IPA interns are housed in apartments in the Georgetown neighborhood or in the George Washington University dormitories and have easy access to

the Orthodox couple at the University of Pennsylvania as part of the OU’s Heshe and Harriet Seif Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (JLIC).

The IPA also brings in speakers for the interns. Previous speakers include acclaimed Supreme Court litigator Nathan Lewin and Deputy Secretary of Health and Human Services Dr. Tevi Troy.

By the summer’s end, the interns and the Capitol Hill political community feel the benefits of their mutually rewarding partnership. The IPA staff report that each year, congressmen and women as well as senators and executives of Jewish political organizations compliment the IPA on the caliber and performance of its interns. According to Ambinder, a volunteer for Yachad/National Jewish Council for Disabilities, the OU’s program that addresses the needs of individuals with disabilities, the internship allowed her to forge important political connections. As an avid member of the student government at Queens College, she was able to bring in three senators to speak at the college.

“We are facilitating Jewish leaders ... by placing them in powerful environments they wouldn’t ordinarily be exposed to,” says Litwack. “That experience is coupled with a Torah environment that fires up their feelings of communal activism and political advocacy with a Jewish focus.” ■

For more information on the internship program, please call 202-513-6484.

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Americans think about the pressing issues of the day. Rotenberg says he saw “democracy at work.”

IPA interns are “an eclectic bunch with differing opinions,” says Ambinder, who plans on pursuing a career in law. “We had some heated debates,” she says. “We [often] discussed ethical questions; how liberal the law should be and the Torah’s point of view.” But the one thing they all agreed on: the crucial value of being politically involved.

“We owe it to ourselves to be involved,” says twenty-year-old Auriel Streit of Los Angeles, who is majoring

Keshet Israel, the only Orthodox synagogue in downtown DC, which provides generous hospitality to interns every summer. “They welcomed us with open arms,” attests Rotenberg.

The IPA maximizes the internship program with thought-provoking lectures on Torah and politics. This past summer, Rabbi Mordechai and Limor Friedman offered weekly classes to the interns, followed by a communal dinner. The sessions highlighted Jewish themes with political overtones and delved into controversial issues such as euthanasia and gay marriage. During the year, the Friedmans serve as