

Temil Omilabu

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Wellman-Hill Recipient Reflection

White House Internship

My Summer at the People's House

This past summer, I had the opportunity to work as an intern at The White House. I spent twelve weeks in the Office of Presidential Correspondence reading letters, emails, and all sorts of correspondence the American people sent to President Obama. Outside of the time I spent working, I got to attend state arrival ceremonies to formally invite foreign leaders to the United States, the Vice President's Cancer Moonshot Summit, Marine One departure ceremonies, and much more. Additionally, I was able to hear from many inspiring White House senior leaders from the First Lady, the Chief of Staff, the Press Secretary, the Director of Communications, the Vice President, and President Obama himself. Without doubt, my time at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue was the most exciting, inspiring, and meaningful twelve weeks of my working life, thus far.

Although I had studied how the government works and I understood its functions on a textbook level, as I flew to Washington, D.C. in May, I had no idea what to expect. To me, the big white building had always been a beacon of hope – I remembered visiting Washington as an elementary student during President George W. Bush's second term and seeing the White House for the first time. It was massive yet inviting, and I wanted more than anything to go inside. Years later, I could not believe that I would actually be on the inside of the black fence.

As I walked into the White House Complex on my first day, I felt a rush of emotions: nervousness, excitement, and anxiousness, to name a few. I kept sane by reminding myself that this feeling would pass -- I would get used to being there and after a while, I wouldn't feel so excited and nervous all the time. Yet, every day for 12 weeks, the feeling of bewilderment never left. Right when I thought I was getting used to the everyday routines of the White House complex, something would surprise me or inspire me beyond belief. I remember walking down a hallway of the Eisenhower Executive Office Building one morning and casually running into the Chief Technology Officer, who was curious about my experience as an intern. I couldn't believe

somebody with so much prestige and such an important job stopped me – an unpaid intern who didn't even have a bachelor's degree yet – to have a quick conversation. Perhaps the most inspiring aspect of working for President Obama's administration was the chance to learn from the hundreds of staff members (at all levels) – a staff that came from all walks of life but shared one strong passion and desire to rally behind the President and work in the best interest of the country.

In the Office of Presidential Correspondence, I spent my days reading thousands of stories. I learned first-hand just how powerful language, communication, and written correspondence is. Nothing quite ties the American people to the President like the written word. When I first learned that I would be tasked with the job of reading hundreds of letters on behalf of the President, I thought it would get old really quickly. I thought I could only read a finite number of letters before they began to lose their charm, or before they stopped being touching, compelling, or funny. Yet, twelve weeks went by and I was still moved every single day. Thousands of people write to the President every day sharing similar stories; but, every letter is crafted differently, stitched together by the writer's individual perspective. I learned that the art of storytelling is a beautiful one because although many stories may be similar, stories are hardly ever told the same way. I was amazed and humbled by how everyday citizens were willing to share their personal narratives with the President. People were willing to share everything from stories about personal hardships to exciting life news. In the same hour, I would read a story about how the Affordable Care Act saved someone's life, a story sharing emotions about the Orlando shooting, a letter informing the President of a couple's newborn baby, or an invitation to a wedding or birthday party. I was continuously inspired by the "ten letters a day" – the ten letters that we, the correspondence staff and interns, collectively chose as a representation of the country's concerns. These letters were from young children, elderly veterans, working class couples, college students, etc. I found it hopeful that people, regardless of their situations or where they came from, thought to write to the President. I always talk about how political efficacy and voter-turnout could be better in this country, and how it irks me that young people aren't voting, but the thousands of people who wrote to the President every day revealed to me just how in-tune people are with the political and economic state of our country. After all,

whether people acknowledge it or not, the decisions made in Washington affect all of us, every day. Being able to watch those decisions getting made and immediately read personal stories and testimonies about how those political decisions have directly affected people made politics and government feel even more vital.

Perhaps the most exciting day of my internship was when I was told to draft a letter on behalf of the President. A letter writer had written President Obama a meaningful, personal letter, and my supervisor wanted me to draft a response on the President's behalf. I was given only a few hours to complete this task. My first thought was, "I can't believe they're allowing me to represent the President in this way!" However, that letter, and the many more I wrote after it, simplified the big, scary enigma of "government." I realized that hardworking, intelligent, and often unpaid and unthanked people *are* the government. Surely, Senators, the President, the Supreme Court Justices, and our Representatives get the most airtime on national media, but there are hundreds of thousands of people who are equally passionate about public service and who are doing equally important jobs, and all of these people make up the government.

There is not one thing I would change about my summer (except, maybe I would have liked to get more sleep). The work I did was fulfilling, challenging, and humbling. On my last day as a White House intern, I walked out of the complex feeling a new energy to take on the world and make a difference. I cannot thank the Obama Administration and the Office of Presidential Correspondence enough for instilling a passion for people and their stories in me. I feel fortunate to have worked for a President who values the individual story and encourages all those who work for him to do the same. Upon graduation, wherever my career takes me, I now know that this is a value I find crucial to the fulfillment of public service.