THE HILL meets
Capitol Hill

Students live and learn in Washington, D.C.,
through Capitol Hill Internship Program

by Dean Hartman
Sixteen students—black and white, conservative and liberal, small-town and big-city—all sharing one house for one semester in Washington, D.C.

Sounds like a TV episode of “The Real World” or “Big Brother.”

In truth, it’s the routine start each semester of the Capitol Hill Internship Program, an opportunity offered through the United Methodist College Washington Consortium. In fall, spring and during Jan Term, LaGrange students arrive at a townhouse within walking distance of the Capitol and begin their CHIP experience.

And when they leave, most describe it as life-changing.

From dean to referee

Since the program’s inception in 2001, Dr. Doug Steinel has served as its director, a job that he says involves being the students’ “nurse, counselor, dean and department chair.”

“I’m the one who referees when they have a dispute,” he says. “And I’m the one who makes sure someone’s been named chairman of the snow-removal committee.”

The narrow red-brick residence the students share is set up as four basic single-sex apartments, each with its own living room and kitchen. That set-up helps keep the TV-drama down to a minimum.

For many, their arrival marks their first experience living in an urban setting. “They come here and they’re apprehensive: I’m from Indianola, Iowa,” Dr. Steinel says. “But by the time they’ve been here four or five weeks, they’re, I can do this; I can make it here.

“They grow confidence.”

His academic role comes into play because students are earning course credit for their experience. Between their internship and their required classes, students with a wide variety of majors earn the equivalent of a semester’s work on their home campuses.

And they pay no more than their equivalent tuition and room charges. For a semester’s worth of living and learning in the nation’s capital, it’s a real value, Dr. Steinel believes.

He calls it experiential learning at its best.

Living history

For most CHIP students, their first days in Washington deliver a good bit of “wow” factor. For some, it never wears off.

LaGrange senior Avery Robertson spent this past January as an intern for Georgia Representative Hank Johnson. On one of his first days on the job, he attended the swearing-in ceremony of the Congressional Black Caucus, and his guide took him through the Capitol Rotunda and Statuary Hall on the way.

“It was one of those feelings, like, Wow, I’m really here. This is a place where great men and women have walked,” he says. “And since I want to be a representative one day, it just made it all the more exciting.”

Sharing the same room as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Martin Luther King III and Grammy Award-winning gospel singer Tramaine Hawkins left a strong impression on the new intern—and the positive vibe remained throughout his month there.

“The city lived up to my expectations and beyond,” he says. “I thought it would be more like New York, and people would be rude. But it’s actually a decent city. “I wasn’t ready for the fast pace, but after a while you get used to it. You start to fit in.”

The pace in Avery’s office was particularly brisk in the days leading up to the inauguration of President Obama. With major legislative issues already brewing in the background, constituents also were pressing hard for tickets to the historic event.

As a reward for his efforts, Avery was handed a ticket to the ceremony by Rep. Johnson.

He left the CHIP house at 6:30 that morning and got in line at about 8:30.

“It was very cold,” he says. “At one point, I thought I might lose my toes. But braving the cold was worth it.”

His designated area was just below the Capitol Reflection Pool—a spot many could only dream of.

“It was very overwhelming,” he says. “To be able to tell my children one day that I was there when the first African-American president was sworn in is a blessing—and an overwhelming feeling.”

Uniting with the U.N.

Junior Joel Coady experienced the months leading up to the election and its immediate aftermath as part of the CHIP program during fall semester. But his internship didn’t have anything specifically to do with Capitol Hill, as is true for many of the interns.

Joel worked with the United Na-
tions Foundation—an employer he pursued for months before getting the final go-ahead just two weeks before his departure for Washington.

Drawn to the U.N. and its ideals since high school, he believed working there would be a natural fit. So he located his preferred agency and applied for a paid internship, but the process proved more challenging than he first thought.

“I had three phone interviews with them and then had to submit a writing sample and an essay,” he says. “When they finally called me and said, ‘Are you still interested in the position?’ I was, like, ‘Of course I’m still interested!’”

He spent his time at the foundation working primarily with Nothing But Nets, a campaign combating malaria deaths by providing insecticide-treated bed nets to regions of Africa devastated by the disease.

“It was a lot different than any other job I’ve had,” he says. “Just getting up in the morning and knowing that every 30 seconds a child dies from malaria—and I can do something about it. It was very rewarding.”

And while he was helping change others’ lives, Joel found that his was changing as well.

“I learned a lot at the U.N. about how to work with others, how to be punctual, be professional,” he says. “In the college world, it’s so quick and to-the-point, you almost don’t always speak in complete sentences.

“It really made me see that it’s important the way you communicate with others, the way you carry yourself.”

His learning process was supplemented by the required classes that CHIP students take part in. Each Friday morning, they meet with Dr. Steinel for a seminar about the Washington experience. That afternoon, the group tours a significant site or museum.

During the week, students also take one of two offered classes in the evening. And given the time of year, Joel opted for a course on campaigns and elections.

“My teacher was the vice president for an international lobbying firm,” Joel says. “He was probably the smartest man I’d ever met.”

Guest speakers from across the political spectrum also made it memorable. And to top it off, Joel ran into Senator John McCain in a hallway not long after the election and—using his newly polished people skills—introduced himself.

Defending the district

During her time in Washington, Rachel Deloach ’08 also met many memorable people—though some weren’t in the headlines for positive reasons. Rachel spent the spring before her graduation as an intern with the District of Columbia attorney general’s office.

There, she assisted two lawyers who were defending the district, and she got a firsthand look at the legal process.

“I was surprised to see how many documents that the attorneys had to read,” she says. “And I didn’t expect that their workload would be so much. Their average caseload was 40 to 50 cases—some that they had been working on for years.

A Capitol consortium

Nine member colleges make up the CHIP alliance. The partnership enables students to live and work in Washington—and earn credit from their home institutions around the nation:

Coe College, Iowa
Creighton University, Nebraska
LaGrange College, Georgia
Lindsey Wilson College, Kentucky
Nebraska Wesleyan University, Nebraska
Pfeiffer University, North Carolina
Simpson College, Iowa,
Southwestern University, Texas
Wofford College, South Carolina
“It gave me a high level of respect for attorneys because the work that they do is really strenuous and time consuming.”

Rachel attended depositions, summarized court documents and spent a great deal of time at the police department retrieving files and criminal records. She also sat in on a high-profile trial that she had assisted with.

“It fascinated me,” she says. “One thing that I did learn is that a lot of people make a career out of suing other people.”

Particularly rewarding were the relationships she built with the attorneys in the office.

“They were really down-to-earth and helpful,” she says. “I asked them anything … and pretty much got an education on the law.”

One day in particular stands out in her memory. She attended a mediation with one of her attorneys, who had to rein in the opposing counsel.

“She told him that her intern—me—knew more about the case than he did. It sort of put me on the spot. She was amazing.”

At that moment, Rachel knew what she wanted to do with her life.

For Rachel Deloach ’08, a CHIP internship provided career direction. Her semester-long experience with the District of Columbia attorney general’s office confirmed her desire to be a lawyer. She’s now applying to graduate school.

**Making the connection**

Those types of epiphanies aren’t uncommon among Capitol Hill interns, says Dr. Tracy Lightcap, LaGrange College Professor of Political Science and the College’s representative on the CHIP board.

Regardless of their major, students in these internships gain “a sense of goals larger than just getting a good grade from Dr. Lightcap,” he says, citing example after example of students who make the connection between their academic work and the world of work.

“It’s not a shock to me, but it’s almost always a shock to them,” he says.

A longtime proponent of service-learning, Dr. Lightcap believes such real-world exposure is one of the best ways for students to see the links between classroom concepts and their application for practical purposes.

“Education works best when you give students a concrete example of the kinds of work that they could do using the ideas that you’ve discussed in class,” he says. “It simply works better.

“Now, the smarter and more energetic the student is in the classroom, the more they’ll get from an internship. That’s why we try to send our better students to Washington, and we’ve sent some of our best—with good success.”

Though the Capitol lends its name to the CHIP effort, students who participate aren’t necessarily political science majors. Undergraduates from nearly any area of study can take part in the program.

So, do the experiences of these recent interns confirm his ideal of a life-changing connection?

Rachel says her experience validated her desire to have a career as an attorney. She has just taken the LSAT and is beginning to apply at law schools around the country.

Joel has decided he’d like a permanent job with the U.N. one day. After graduation, he plans to do some work abroad, maybe with the Peace Corps, and then possibly “come back to the U.N. and work abroad for them.”

His long-term goal is to become a maker of documentary films about world issues.

And Avery, after his CHIP experience, shifted his initial plan of enlisting in the armed services and is now hoping to study public policy or public administration—with the goal of making his way into politics and becoming a U.S. representative.

“Working with my congressman has shown me that this is what I really want to do,” he says.

“It’s very interesting, but I’ve talked with a couple of the students who have been up here before, and they agree that this helps you make these decisions—and make them very quickly.”