



12-2010

First Time on the Hill: My Big Adventure as a Member of the WLA Legislative Team

Julie Miller

Butler University, jlmille5@butler.edu

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Recommended Citation

Miller, Julie. "First Time on the Hill: My Big Adventure as a member of the WLA Legislative Team," [with Kristie Kirkpatrick], Alki: The Washington Library Association Journal, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Dec.) 2010, pp. 20-21.

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First Time on the Hill: My Big Adventure as a Member of the WLA Legislative Team

by Julie Miller, with help from Kristie Kirkpatrick

Last spring, WLA President Tim Mallory sent out an urgent message to WLA members: State Librarian Jan Walsh and WLA Federal Relations Co-coordinator Rand Simmons, both stalwart advocates for Washington libraries at the annual legislative days, were unable to attend Library Advocacy Day in Washington, D.C. on June 29. Team Washington, the WLA advocacy team, needed volunteers to go on visits to Washington's legislators on Capitol Hill. I was going to ALA, paying my own way due to the state budget freeze for public employees, and—as luck would have it—had no committee meetings or essential programs to attend on June 29. So I took a deep breath, typed a brief message to Tim (something like, “Put me on the list”), and hit send. Thanks to the confidence and charisma of team leader Kristie Kirkpatrick, great information from the folks at the Washington State Library, and the training provided by ALA, I learned a lot and had a great experience. Here's a chronicle of my adventure as a first-time advocate on the Hill:

Friday, June 25, 1:25 pm: I review materials, including ALA's “Tips for Success” and “Key Legislative Issues for Library Advocates,” Washington legislators' priorities printed out from their websites, and ACRL's terrific toolkit “The Power of Personal Persuasion,” on the plane from Seattle to DC. I try to remember Schoolhouse Rock's jingle about how a bill becomes a law. Getting nervous.

Saturday, June 26, 10:30 am–12:00 pm: Along with Kristie Kirkpatrick and Washington's ALA Councilor Cher Ravagni, I attend the ALA advocacy training session “What to Know Before You Go.” We practice the fundamentals of the legislative office visit:

“Hi! My name is _____ and I'm from _____.”
 “I'm here to talk to you about _____ issues that affect libraries in your district.”
 “Let me tell you why this is important: _____ [insert compelling real-life library story.]”
 “That's why we really hope you will _____ [insert action, e.g., support H.B. 1234]. Will you be able to do that?”

Kristie distributes to Team Washington members packets of information from the Washington State Library about recent appropriations and issues for specific Washington districts. I'm feeling inspired and a bit more excited than nervous.

Saturday, June 26, 12:00–1:00 pm: I locate the advocacy pavilion at the ALA exhibit hall and pick up a vivid red “Vote for Libraries” T-shirt (which is later appropriated by my spouse).

Monday, June 28, 3:30 pm: Having missed Team Washington meetings with Reps. Brian Baird and Norm Dicks due to a scheduling conflict, I take a taxi through pouring rain for a 4:00 pm meeting with Sen. Patty Murray's staff. I receive a tutorial from the taxi driver about the office buildings for senators (Russell, Dirksen, and Hart buildings) and representatives (Cannon, Longworth, and Rayburn buildings). I pass through the metal detector and experience a feeling of dowdy middle-agedness as I pass impossibly young staffers in little black dresses.

I find Team Washington members, including Kristie Kirkpatrick, Mary Carr and her partner John Olsen, and Tim Mallory. We receive a warm welcome from Moire Duggan in Sen. Murray's office, where Kristie takes the lead in asking for the senator's support for the Library Services and Technology Act (\$300 million) and for school libraries in the Elementary & Secondary Education Act. Before I know it, my first legislative office visit is over. I have gotten my feet wet (literally and figuratively)!

Tuesday, June 29, 9:30 am: Team Washington (now including recent iSchool graduate Naomi Bishop and Seattle Public Library Director Susan Hildreth) meets with staffer Seth Burroughs when Rep. Rick Larsen himself pops in. “My sister is a librarian, so obviously you've got me,” quips Rep. Larsen. Very cool!

Tuesday, June 29, 10:30 am: Team Washington makes a quick change into T-shirts for the Advocacy Day rally, posing in front of the Capitol Building along the way. ALA Past President Camila Alire fires up the crowd as the temperature climbs under the midday sun.

Tuesday, June 29, 12:00 pm: We head back across the Hill to the Cannon Building and take the tunnels that connect the Capitol complex to have lunch in the canteen in the basement of the Longworth Building. The joint is jumping with staff, visitors, and the occasional legislator. And my salad is delicious. Team Washington holds a strategy session for the afternoon, as

Julie Miller is Associate Dean of Libraries at Eastern Washington University. Kristie Kirkpatrick is WLA's Federal Relations Co-coordinator and Director of Whitman County Library.

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members come and go depending on other commitments and departure schedules.

Tuesday, June 29, 1:00 pm–4:30 pm: It's all a blur! Team Washington visits the offices of Rep. Jim McDermott, Rep. Jay Inslee, Rep. Doc Hastings, Sen. Maria Cantwell, Rep. David Reichert, and Rep. Adam Smith (who joins us for a photo op), taking the tunnels between the Cannon, Longworth, Dirksen, and Rayburn buildings. (Note to self: if you do this advocacy thing again, wear comfortable shoes.) Kristie takes the lead, and team members take turns offering the “compelling library story” in the advocacy script, depending on legislative district and the priorities of individual legislators. I'm getting the hang of it!

Tuesday, June 29, 5:00 pm: My adventure on the Hill ends with meeting Rep. Cathy McMorris Rogers. Team Washington is down to three members—Kristie, Mary Carr, and myself—all of whom live in the Congresswoman's district. We expect to attend a group coffee with Rep. Rogers, but instead end up in a private fifteen-minute meeting! Kristie provides a run-down of the projects that have benefited libraries in the 5th district, include the Renew Washington grant funded by LSTA. Rep. Rogers listens to our spiel, even takes notes, and then asks a member of her staff to snap a picture of her with us.

And then it's over! Mary Carr and I share a taxi back to our hotels, where I arrive just in time for the free wine—and—hors d'oeuvre happy hour in the lobby. What a day!

I'd do it again in a heartbeat. 📖

Members of Team Washington 2010

Kristie Kirkpatrick, WLA Federal Relations Co-coordinator and Director of Whitman County Library

Tim Mallory, WLA President and Adult Services Coordinator at Timberland Regional Library

Naomi Bishop, University of Washington iSchool graduate

Mary Carr, Dean of Instruction, Spokane Community College Libraries

Susan Hildreth, City Librarian, The Seattle Public Library

Christie Kaaland, Antioch University

Julie Miller, Associate Dean of Libraries, Eastern Washington University



Team Washington members outside Rep. Larsen's office in the Cannon Office Building.
L–R: Julie Miller, Tim Mallory, Naomi Bishop, Kristie Kirkpatrick, Susan Hildreth, Mary Carr and her partner John Olsen.



Librarians from Washington gather for the Library Advocacy Day rally on June 28, 2010.



Rep. Adam Smith with Team Washington.
L–R: Julie Miller, John Olsen, Kristie Kirkpatrick, Rep. Smith, Christie Kaaland, Mary Carr.