

## **ASHS Leadership Cohort III Visits the Hill Sheri Dorn, University of Georgia**

Tuesday, April 16, 2024, was hectic. For me, the day started with a crushing drive to northern Atlanta in workday traffic to give an Extension presentation before grinding through airport security to catch a flight to D.C. Others in our cohort followed similar paths – setting out a research plot, teaching a class, or some other professional commitment around which we fit this trip to D.C. Regardless of our pre-flight juggling act, three of us from Cohort III -- Judy Jean (University of Florida), Natalie Bumgarner (University of Tennessee), and Sheri Dorn (University of Georgia) -- made our way to D.C. that day, joined by veterans Thomas Bjorkman (Cornell University), Louise Ferguson (University of California), Bhimu Patel (Texas A&M), Heather Kirk-Ballard (Louisiana State University), and Julie Campbell (University of Georgia).



Most of us were hungry by the time we arrived because we missed lunch in the push to catch our plane. Some of us then had lengthy train rides in evening rush hour. Needless to say, by the time we arrived in the lobby of the Hilton Garden Inn in Old Town Alexandria, we were frazzled and perhaps a bit apprehensive of the next day's agenda.

Fortunately, we were well prepared for our Hill visit. Thomas Bjorkman began coaching us in December as part of our regular leadership cohort meetings. He'd give us homework – "Go find out who your legislators are and what they are working on." "Know

what's important to them." "This is how you structure the conversation. This what they are looking for from you." "Schedule your meetings, let them know you are coming."

Then, in a final preparation effort the week before our trip, Thomas played the role of a congressional member while we practiced our asks as constituents. It was just downright painful -- we didn't necessarily have the words to express ourselves and lacked familiarity with the situation. I'm sure it was grueling for Thomas as we fumbled sentences and stopped mid-phrase, unsure of what to say. Thankfully, he patiently coached us through the conversations both in our sessions and again Tuesday evening in the hotel lobby.



Heather Kirk-Ballard, part of ASHS Leadership Cohort I, was very familiar with this initial unease on the D.C. trip. Fortunately, it gets better, as we were soon to learn! She spoke of how, on this second trip for her, it was thrilling to more confidently navigate the halls of the House and Senate offices and engage with staffers from her home state.

"Despite initial doubts of my first visit and having feelings akin to imposter syndrome, the comprehensive training from our Leadership Program prepared me well. The Hill team was deeply involved, ensuring we were thoroughly briefed, and our meetings were well organized," Heather said.

When all of us in the ASHS group finally did arrive Tuesday evening in the lobby of the Hilton Garden Inn in Old Town Alexandria, we were ready for Sally Murphy's well-ordered agenda for the visit. We were ready to pair up with different members of the cohort to make our calls and present our messages to legislators. We were ready to catch the train into the city early Wednesday morning. We were ready to divide up and move throughout the Capitol. We were also VERY ready for a tasty dinner on the streets of Old Town Alexandria where we could relax, laugh, and visit after an intense day.

Wednesday's visit to the Hill dawned bright and early. After successful navigation of the train into the city, we headed straight for our meeting locations. Some of us were

greeted and further prepped by our university's staff. Judy Jean from University of Florida attended an orientation session with UF staff. Louise Ferguson was eager to attend with Judy to see how universities would handle these visits.



For Julie Campbell (Cohort I) and myself, both from the University of Georgia, it was incredibly helpful to receive assistance from university staff. Not only were they able to schedule meetings with legislative aides that we would have struggled to make, but they also arranged for a UGA undergraduate intern to lead us through the Capitol buildings, hallways, and yes, the Senate train!



All of us took turns going to meetings together, rather than going individually. For colleagues like Julie, Natalie, and myself, who frequently work together on regional projects, it was a natural flow of conversation with the legislative aides. Thanks to Thomas' preparations and handy printed sheet, we were able to easily talk about things we were most familiar with. Julie shared about the importance of SCRI funding, while Natalie addressed the importance of Specialty Crop Block Grants. We took turns discussing the importance of the IR4 project, and I would chime in with a message about the value and importance of the Extension system. With each visit, we became more comfortable. I believe it brought depth and relevance to our asks to be able to speak from personal experience.



Natalie reflected on the importance of having these conversations each year. “Even with an Extension mindset and general audience communication experience,” shared Natalie, “I still need to hone the message of societal benefit. We’re still mostly preaching to our choirs.”

By the time we all met up in the tunnels of the Metro to ride the train back to the hotel, we were all very satisfied with our day. We had spoken collectively with at least 10 legislative aides for congressional members. We had developed a familiarity with the halls and elevators, and even the security stations, of the Capitol buildings. Once again, though, we were hungry after an intense day and looking forward to a delicious dinner at Theismann’s Restaurant as we debriefed and processed our experience.



“Returning to Capitol Hill for a second visit with ASHS, this time along with new participants, enriched the experience greatly,” shared Heather. “Seeing their reactions reminded me of my own initial visit, but I felt much more at ease this time. I was immensely proud of how the new leadership members handled their responsibilities, showing great potential and dedication.”

When you take a trip or complete a significant project with a team, valuable connections are forged. Working through the Leadership Fellows has very much been that way for all of us. Working together on our group project and sharing our individual projects supported lasting professional connections that we’ll enjoy for years to come. This D.C. trip, though, is something special. Even though not all of us were able to make the trip, we still prepared together. Those who went came back changed – more confident and more ready to contribute to the conversation again.

Heather notes that change, too. “This transformative experience is highly recommendable,” she says. “After all, as President Barack Obama said, ‘Your voice can change the world.’”

Louise Ferguson (University of California), former ASHS President and founder of the Leadership Fellows, enjoyed her visit to D.C., as well.

“This was my third time to accompany the ASHS Leadership Academy Fellows to DC.,” she shared. “What impresses me most each time is how quickly the Fellows move from

nervous trepidation to effective presenters of ASHS's Farm Bill priorities, how their industries and communities have benefited from the representative's votes, and how they can help the representative. For the DC trip, the best mentors for the Class IV's DC trip will be the previous classes' Fellows."

So, Cohort III, save time in your spring 2025 schedule. Looks like we're going back to Washington!

