



Paging for the 2000 House of Delegates

by Tammy Ivins, Amherst

I'll put it bluntly: being a page for the General Assembly rocked. Trust me, I served as one for the House of Delegates during the past session. It is a paid position, and in addition to my paycheck I received more than enough expense money each week. We lodged at the Omni Hotel in Richmond, just a few blocks from the Capitol. Each page had only one or two roommates.

Every wonderful experience involves work. In this case we had to work *hard*. Pages had to be at the Capitol at 8:30 a.m. If we volunteered for delivering calendars, however, we had to be ready for work at least a half-hour earlier. Calendars are listings of the bills that will be discussed that day. They can very thick and it was hard work to carry 40 or so around—particularly when the elevator broke, and we had to go the 7th floor.

The pages operated from the House Page Room. When we were not on a special assignment, we were in a general pool. Aides, delegates, etc. called the page room when they needed something done. Pages worked for *everybody*, not just their own delegate. Sometimes we were working the floor. This means we sat on a bench on the floor while the House was in session. Nearby was an electronic board with numbers and lights, which were activated by buttons on the delegates' desks when they needed assistance. At lunchtime the board lit up like a Christmas tree. Floor work could be boring at times, but the delegates' famous little-boy-like antics could be amusing. They varied from pushing each other's page buttons, to rubber band fights, to just having fun. They really appreciated the work we did, and always tried to get to know many pages personally.

Our most important job was one we were told right away that we were never going to enjoy. This long, boring, and *so* easy-to-mess-up task was *bill books*. These are collections of more than 10 large binders that hold organized copies of every version of every bill and resolution in the entire General Assembly. Every day we had to file at least one set each. Sometimes there were so many bills to be put in their right places that it took an hour.

Our comings and goings were monitored by a sign in/sign out sheet in the Page Room, as well as by three Page Masters. During work hours we were not allowed off the Capitol Grounds. After work (5 p.m.) we had two chaperones. There was still a strict boundary, and we were not allowed outside alone. From 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. was a required study hall. If our teachers didn't give us enough schoolwork, we had to bring a book to read. The page program paid for several tutors at the study hall to answer

questions, though they did not give tests or teach. They were very helpful and loved working with kids.

The two hours before study hall were chow time. There were many, many places to eat, including two restaurants on the Capitol grounds. The best breakfast deal was at the cafeteria in the Crestar Building nearby. The preferred restaurant was Wendy's, mostly for convenience; it was in a building attached to the hotel by a skywalk.

From 9 p.m. to 10 p.m. pages were allowed in the indoor pool, which was *not* heated. 10:30 p.m. is the strict curfew; we were in our rooms by then—or else. Boys and girls were restricted to different floors. This, and the curfew, was harshly enforced.

There were several activities arranged for us, up to and including a trip to the mall, a Super Bowl party, and a trip to the circus. The best activities, though, were unplanned. For example, last session there was a major snowstorm, during which we were allowed to return to the hotel early. The important fact about this snowstorm is that (though I was inside at the time and missed it) a small band of heroic House pages (including my brother) destroyed the Senate pages in a snowball fight. We also learned that day that the Delegates and Capitol police had absolutely deadly aims with snowballs.

Being a page had its appealing perks, but we had to be prepared to take it seriously and work hard. I don't mean we had to become fuddy duddies; in fact one page (unknowingly) spent most of one day with a post-it note on his back that read "If found, please return to the House Page Room." Hee hee! I'm saying that while we were there we were looked upon as grown up. This had its downsides, such as having to answer questions for lost school groups and the like, but it allowed us some really unique insights. Aides, Delegates, and Senators were very helpful, and showed genuine delight in watching us learn. Even after becoming used to being friends with these people, nothing beats having an important person stop a conversation to greet us by name and ask what we were doing.

I was glad to come home; but, as many people predicted, I had learned to love the rush, the work, and meeting new people. It was like being in a whole separate world, except that instead of being separated from reality, we got an even better look at it. Pages walk away from the General Assembly with a better understanding of the way our government ticks than most of their peers ever will. It is a worthy investment of time to those who would love to test their self-reliance and see the inside of our state government.