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- Calendar
- Print Ads
- Classifieds
- Special Sections
- Homesource
- Employment

home > loudoun > loudoun news home

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Top Stories
 Up Close
 Police/Courts
 Government
 Editorial/Opinion
 Education
 Sports
 Business
 Announcements
 Obituaries
 Real Estate
 Weekender
 Loudoun Friday Times
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Society Pages

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smashing windows

Leesburg girl 'one of our stars' at the Capitol

By Michael Glennon
 Capital News Service
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RICHMOND -- There are many common characteristics among the young people serving as pages in the Virginia Senate: discipline, time- and money-management skills, a commitment to duty -- and a desire to get as many pins as possible for their navy blue blazers.

"I can get them from legislators, assistants or senators," said Caroline Atwill, a Senate page from Leesburg. "A few you can buy; a few are given out by watchers in the page room."

The pins usually depict a Virginia theme such as cardinals (the state bird) or dogwood blossoms (the state tree). They appear almost as medals on an officer's uniform, and rightfully so -- the navy blazer, along with khaki pants or skirt, is the uniform for pages of both the Virginia Senate and the Virginia House of Delegates.

Gwendolyn Bailey, assistant clerk for the Senate, said the pages often leave the collectibles on their blazers after the session and save the jackets as keepsakes.

Naturally, a page's job is a lot more than gathering pins.

"I have to be in the page room by 8:20," Caroline said. "If I am late, the door will be locked, and I will be sent to Ms. Bailey."

Bailey explained that when this happens, she talks to the page about how tardiness disrupts the wheels of government.



Photo Courtesy/Atwill Family
JUNIOR LEGISLATOR:
 Caroline Atwill, a student at Leesburg's Loudoun Country Day School, is spending nine weeks in Richmond as a page in the Virginia Senate.

"It doesn't come up very often," she said.

After roll call, the pages undergo a uniform check. If they pass muster, Bailey assigns them their jobs for the morning, including collating and filing bills or working in the library or post office.

When the Senate convenes, usually at noon during the General Assembly session, the pages are there. During the days before the session starts, the pages train on Senate procedure.

"We practice how we walk on the floor, how we get the senators lunch, how we address senators and the rotation on the bench," Caroline said.

The rotation on the bench refers to the three Senate pages sitting just to the right of the podium at all times. Senators have a button at their desks, and when one summons a page, another page takes the vacated place by the podium.

There is a lot to remember on the floor and a lot to do off the floor, but Caroline Atwill excels at it.

"Caroline is one of our stars," Bailey said. "You learn early who you can count on to get the job done. Caroline is one of those individuals."

All pages excel academically -- an A or B average is required to even be considered. That is important because all pages live in Richmond during the week and thus miss school during the legislative session.

"Missing nine weeks of school has been a source of concern, but her headmasters at Loudoun Country Day School have been tremendously supportive -- supportive of her going and supportive during her absence," said Bill Atwill, Caroline's father.

"Other than that, it's just the first time we've had her away that long."

Atwill said he had known about the page program for some time through his law partner, Sen. Bill Mims (R-Leesburg). "I kind of had it in the back of my head that she ought to apply."

It was a "tremendous opportunity" for Caroline to get a close-up view of the legislative process, Atwill said.

Senate pages also experience a fair amount of independence, especially for 13- to 15-year-olds. After the day's work ends at 5

p.m., the pages have until 7 p.m. as their own time.

"It's time for dinner, hanging out with friends," Caroline said.

Most pages stay at the Omni Hotel, a 10-minute walk from the Capitol. On the ground floor of the hotel is a Wendy's, and several other restaurants are within the three blocks where the pages are permitted to roam. Pages staying in the hotel receive a living allowance of \$125 a week in addition to a salary of \$130.

After dinner, between 7 and 9 p.m., a room in the hotel serves as the pages' study hall. "We're faxed our homework," Caroline said. She added that some pages try to do their homework during the day in the page room or clerk's office.

Curfew is at 10 p.m. and is enforced by chaperones. On some afternoons, however, the pages are split in groups: Half of them visit sites of interest in Richmond, while the others work. The next day, the groups switch.

On weekends, the pages can go home to catch up with family, friends and schoolwork. Bill Atwill said that conversation can be limited then, though that's "in keeping with being 14."

"If you ask about the week, 'It was good.' 'Did you meet anybody?' 'Yes.'"

"Once she kind of relaxes and unfolds the events of the week, she said she's having an outstanding time."

Atwill said he appreciates the "tight ship" Bailey runs with Susan Clarke Schaar, the clerk of the Senate. He also praised the orientation to which parents were invited at the beginning of the page training.

Bailey said Caroline Atwill is an asset to the program.

"She represents us well."

Rules for becoming a legislative page

Interested in becoming a page at the General Assembly? The first step is to study -- not about state government, just in general.

The page programs at the Capitol take applicants' academic performance into consideration, and the Senate program specifically rules out anyone with less than a B average.

The House and Senate vary slightly on age requirements: The House takes 13- and 14-year-olds only, whereas the Senate takes students between 13 and 15.

The application process consists of filling out a form and writing an essay.

The House of Delegates takes about 30 students, appointed by the House speaker, currently William J. Howell (R-Stafford). In addition, the House has two head pages -- teenagers who worked as pages during the previous General Assembly session.

The Senate elects 11 pages, one from each congressional district. The state senators within the congressional district rotate in determining who gets to have a page. The Senate leadership appoints five other pages.

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," said Gwendolyn F. Bailey, assistant clerk of the Senate.

To give as many young people as possible the chance to be pages, the Senate does not let pages serve for more than one session and does not accept pages who previously served in the House of Delegates.

For information on becoming a page for the House, or to request an application, call 804-698-1510 or e-mail your name and address to pageinfo@house.state.va.us .

To receive information and an application to become a Senate page, call 1-888-892-6948 toll-free or 698-7410 in Richmond, or send e-mail to information@sov.state.va.us .

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