News

Capitol Insiders

The arms and the legs of the General Assembly

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Chris Binder, an eighth-grader at Hayfield Secondary School in Alexandria, is serving as a page for the Virginia Senate this session. Chris, 15, is from Lorton.

CAPITAL NEWS SERVICE -- For the General Assembly's 2005 session, the state has hired an employee who works 40 hours a week and lives at a Richmond hotel.

Like a Secret Service agent, he stays reserved and follows strict instructions. He has no experience regarding the work he is doing. In fact, he has not worked anywhere before.

But then, that's understandable: Chris Binder is an eighth-grader at Hayfield Secondary School in Alexandria.

Chris, 15, is one of 72 youths chosen from across Virginia to serve as legislative pages this year.

"It's my first job. I get paid. Money is good. I get a first-hand look on how the government works, and it will look good on my résumé," said Chris, who is from Lorton.

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For $130 a week, pages collate bills, make photocopies, run errands and even bring a coffee and a sandwich to a legislator.

Chris and other pages from outside Richmond get an extra $125 a week to cover expenses such as food and long-distance phone calls. The state also puts them up at the Omni Richmond Hotel near the Capitol.

"It's been great doing all this. Tiring, but great," Chris said about his job.

Around 8:30 a.m., Chris walks about three blocks from the hotel to the General Assembly Building, where he reports for duty in the Senate page room.

Soon after, he is assigned a project that may include working for a senator, a Senate committee or the Senate clerk's office.

"Pages are the arms and the legs of the General Assembly," said Gwen Bailey, assistant Senate clerk. "They are here to run errands for the members of the Senate, and it will be difficult to do this without them."

C.B. Arnett, assistant page coordinator, said, "I don't know if a page, in the years that I've been here, that has ever been unhappy with the job."

To get hired as a page, candidates must be good students because they must keep up with their schoolwork while serving in Richmond. They also must be responsible.

"They are great kids," Arnett said. "If they weren't great kids, they would not be here."

Even so, being minors, pages are under close supervision. Their uniforms are inspected, their conduct is monitored and their movement around the Capitol area is restricted.

"They are being watched all the time by people who may want to admire what they are doing, but also may want to criticize," Arnett said. "They understand that they are under the gun."

Even after work, pages follow strict instructions. They must stay in pairs at all times when not working and follow a strict study and bedtime schedule.

Both the Senate and the House select pages. Each chamber's program is competitive. This session, for example, 161 students applied to the House's page program – and 36 were chosen.

Chris said he was excited and shocked when he learned of his selection as a Senate page.

"I didn't think I was getting in," he said.

Chris said his parents are not worried about him living and working so far from home. While in Richmond, he keeps in touch with his family and friends by phone.

What does he tell his friends about his job?

"I tell them I am doing top-secret work for the government," Chris said.

But his friends do not believe him.

Capital News Service is staffed by students from the School of Mass Communications at Virginia Commonwealth University. They provide state government news coverage for news outlets throughout Virginia.

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