



the CAPITOL COURIER

US CAPITOL PAGE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

FEATURE

PAGE SCHOOL MEMORIES: 1963-1966

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GROWING UP IN WASHINGTON D.C. MADE ME AN ATYPICAL STUDENT AT THE CAPITOL PAGE SCHOOL IN 1963. RELATIVE TO OTHER STUDENTS FROM FARAWAY PLACES LIKE ALABAMA AND ARIZONA, CAPITOL PAGE SCHOOL WAS

only a daily bus ride from my home. I could see the Capitol dome from the upstairs back porch off my parents' bedroom. Yet in other ways, Page School was decidedly distant, since the District (as we locals usually called it) was still a southern, segregated city, so my family and I couldn't always reach things that seemed close by because customs got in the way. Being the only black boy in the all white student body for a while made the Page School a very special, if very complicated, high school destination.

Reflecting on those experiences now is especially poignant in light of the 2011 decision to shutter the House Page Program and it affords me the opportunity to think about those

long-ago proximities, what they meant to me then and what significance they hold for me today.

My experiences were a little odd even by Page School standards. I was a local boy, not brought in from afar by southern Democratic political patronage. Also, I was appointed as a page in the Supreme Court, making me one quarter of the smallest 'tribe' in a tribal school whose students referred to themselves in the language of the Hill - "House Majority" pages, "Senate Minority" pages, etc. In addition, I was a long-timer, attending the school as I did for 3 1/2 years. Then there was that other matter, the matter of race. For a while, I was the only black

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FEATURE

ALUMNI ASSOCIATION HOSTS REGIONAL EVENTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

THE U. S. CAPITOL PAGE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION LAUNCHED A SERIES OF REGIONAL ALUMNI EVENTS IN 2013 STARTING WITH A FIRST-EVER GATHERING OF FORMER PAGES THROUGHOUT NEW ENGLAND AT AN EARLY JUNE EVENT IN BOSTON.



JOE STEWART '53, DR. DUANE TAYLOR AND JAN SCHOONMAKER '62

Hosted by board member Peter Darby (House '83) and Mary Shaheen (House '87), over 30 guests gathered for a Sunday afternoon social with a presentation on the Page Documentary that was initially screened at the 2012 Homecoming in Washington

DC. Class years from 1952 to 2011 were represented among the 20 former pages that attended. Billy Peard (House '02), past president of the alumni association and current board member, was also present and provided an update on current and upcoming activities with the association.

In addition, a very successful fundraiser event for the alumni association was held on June 11 at the home of former Secretary of the Senate and board member Walter "Joe" Stewart (Senate '53) in Washington, D.C. The over 25 alumni in attendance were treated to a tour of Joe's beautiful home on Capitol Hill

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PAGE SCHOOL MEMORIES: 1963-1966

kid in the school. Back to that in a moment...

Other than starting school at 6:30 AM on the top floor of the biggest library in the world and greeting the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court most mornings at 10:00 AM, it was a normal high school experience. One year into my page tenure, the Court decided to eliminate the knickers suit (I guess I was too tall and too skinny), bringing us one little step closer to a normal high school experience. While the story did make the front page of the Washington Post, complete with a picture of me in my now-outdated outfit, I regretted seeing that odd anachronism disappear. It was nothing if not distinctive as I walked the marble halls of the Supreme Court building.

Page School had a spirited, hard working but predictably unsuccessful basketball team (being skinny and tall I was usually the center). When the House or Senate stayed late in session we would sometimes go to games with only half our squad. We often lost, but our practices at nearby Wilson High School were a nice change from the starchiness of life in and around the highest institutions in the land. Other than basketball, we had few regular clubs or activities, so we would take properly staged photos of students attending "French Club" or "Math Club" in order to fill the pages of the yearbook and convey to parents at least some sense of high school normalcy.

The School was certainly not a normal public high school. We had short days, tiny classes, and, in retrospect, really good teachers. Naomi Ulmer treated us almost as grown-ups, and actually managed to make science interesting, and Florence Block introduced us to 'new wave' French movies and avant garde novelists.

And for a budding bibliophile who read through the World Book Encyclopedia for fun, being able to walk downstairs to the Guttenberg Bible, or (later), to read Vladimir Nabokov's edits in his own hand (I was reading his "Speak Memory") was a real thrill. So was crawling around on the roof of the U.S. Capitol across the street, climbing the winding stairs into the little garret of a room that sat right below the big white statue above the dome and then scaling the scary ladder up into the base of Lady Liberty, knowing we were at the highest point in Washington.

Happily, I had a life before and beyond Page School. I would hang out on the Hill with my page buddies, but I still had all the friends I grew up with in upper northwest Washington. My family lived in a wonderful, all-too rare community – an integrated circle of people committed to making integration a reality, often working through a progressive group called "Neighbors, Inc."

Since DC was still partly segregated in ways large and small, I would shuttle back and forth between black fraternity meetings and receptions in Georgetown with the kids of congressmen and senators. Since Lucy Baines Johnson

was then dating a page boy from Texas, some of those parties were at the Vice President's residence, and in 1966 LBJ handed out our graduation diplomas at a ceremony at the White House.

Maybe because I'd been to an integrated elementary and junior high school, being with white folks wasn't that much of a big deal, at least as I remember it now. Of course, there were awkward moments – "Why don't you come visit me and my family in Arizona. Of course you can't come to the country club, but you won't mind that will you...?" Ummmm,



WILSON RECEIVING HIS CAPITOL PAGE SCHOOL DIPLOMA AT WHITE HOUSE CEREMONY IN JUNE 1966 FROM PRESIDENT LYNDON JOHNSON, AS VICE PRESIDENT HUBERT HUMPHREY LOOKS ON

I guess not?? (I didn't go). But there was no real overt racism and nastiness, though I could tell the boys from Mississippi and Alabama might be having a tough time of it, but it didn't rise up as an issue for me even among all those southern Democrats. Racist name-calling and getting kicked out of restaurants would come later for me, in other places.

At the School our real extracurricular activity was watching history being made in the nation's highest legislative and judicial bodies, watching and sometimes feeling like special participants, on a daily basis, up close and personal.

It was certainly a thrill to be able literally to hand out major Court decisions to anxiously waiting lawyers and reporters, cases like the landmark redistricting judgment of Baker v. Carr and to be privileged to be on the floor of the House when President Johnson delivered his "We Shall Overcome" address.

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There were smaller aesthetic delights too: chamber music by quartets in the Library's Coolidge Auditorium; poetry readings by the esteemed Librarians of Congress (later called Poet Laureates). One day after his reading, a fellow Court page and I worked up the nerve to invite acclaimed poet Stephen Spender to lunch. To our great surprise he accepted, and I found myself lunching with him at the nearby Ivy Restaurant on my 18th birthday. I didn't have an ID but wanted my first legal drink, and Spender said to the waiter in his best Oxbridge accent, "Don't worry, he's my son and I'll vouch for him."

So what does all this mean, so many years later?

The biggest 'take away' was the excitement of being at the center of important national events. With these experiences behind me, why not seek to work at the White House or the Congress, two institutions I did end up working for, with Congressman Charles Diggs from Detroit, and much later, President Bill Clinton.

"I WAS A LOCAL BOY, NOT BROUGHT IN FROM AFAR BY SOUTHERN DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL PATRONAGE. ALSO, I WAS APPOINTED AS A PAGE IN THE SUPREME COURT . . . THEN THERE WAS THAT OTHER MATTER, THE MATTER OF RACE."

I learned that important people can be approachable and don't have to be jerks. All the Justices treated me with respect, and when I came back home to D.C. from Harvard as an

undergraduate, I would sometimes stop by the Court and talk with Justice Douglas and others about the issues of the day. I learned that if you are going to win in politics and other things, you need to build coalitions with people who may profoundly differ with you. As a page, I ran for student council president and won. I did so by building support among the Senate Dems and House Dems and a bunch of Republican pages who would normally vote for one of their own. A useful skill I practice every day as a dean.

* This article was edited down from the original.



FROM FRONT PAGE OF THE WASHINGTON POST, OCTOBER 5, 1963 WILSON, AT LEFT SPORTING HIS KNICKERS WHILE FELLOW COURT PAGE BILL STRAUSS (COURT '64) MODEL'S NEW OUTFIT

U.S. CAPITOL PAGE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION LIFE MEMBERS

1940s

Francis Nance '44

1950s

Jerry Maddox '51

Don Loker '52

Don Karp '53

W. Joe Stewart '53

Peter Grose '53

Joe Hillings '54

John Nine '54

John Barrison '54

Art Cameron '54

Lowell Baier '56

Vance Morrison '56

Jonathan Wainwright '58

Ken Smith '58

1960s

R. Web Heidelberg '61

Donald Wilson '61

G. Thomas Chapman '62

Bill Hitchcock '62

Sidney Kaplan '62

Tip Hailey '62

Ken Giles '65

Tom Grooms '65

Paul Peterson '65

Chris Cobey '67

Troy Baresel '68

Jim Oliver '68

Jeff Clark '69

Richard Danker '69

1970s

Richard Gooch '71

Anthony Limberakis '71

Jim Nuzzo '71

James Facemire '71

Ellen McConnell Blakeman '72

Julie Price '72

Michael Victorson '72

Jerry Papazian '72

Atlee Valentine Pope '72

Alan Rose '73

Mark Albertson '74

R. Keighley Ward-Jacobson '74

Dan Fitz '74

Michelle Combs '77

Andrew Lechter '78

Tim Gibson '78

Teresa Baker '78

Susanne Cox '79

1980s

Edmund Glabus '80

Peter Darby '83

Claudia Minish '85

Sam Allison '86

Samuel Byrd '88

Carey O'Connor '88

Chryssa Zizos '89

1990s

Sarah Speakman '90

Erik Watson '90

Elizabeth Ambrose '91

Drew Newsom '91

Michelle Patron '91

Michael Stanton '91

Vikram Gopal '91

Jason Kaplan '92

Joshua Kramer '92

Lambert van der Walde '92

Brandan Jones '93

Brian Sells '96

Charlotte Coffee '96

Dan Teague 1998

Erik Yassenoff '98

2000s

Sarah Mirza Hensle '02

Alissa Turnipseed '02

Alexander Smith '10

*As of November 30, 2013