
A summer to remember

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Joseph Mockabee, who interned for seven weeks at the White House in Washington, D.C., poses in the Oval Office.

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It's not often a college student leaves in the morning and says, "Goodbye mom, I'm off to the White House," but that's exactly what Joseph Mockabee did while he served an internship this summer at [1600 Pennsylvania Ave.](#)

Mockabee, who is a political science major at St. Mary's College of Maryland, spent almost seven weeks working in the office of presidential personnel on the White House grounds.

"The surrealness still hasn't passed," the 20-year-old Dunkirk resident said recently. "Hearing those words coming out of my mouth [that I worked at the White House] are like, 'Wow. Breathtaking.' It's definitely something I won't ever get used to saying."

Mockabee applied for the program in 2019 but was not selected, but applied again last winter through St. Mary's College of Maryland's Washington Program. The program has three components — it works with students to secure interns, pairs students with St. Mary's College of Maryland alums to get the most out of their internship, and holds classes about how public policies.

“It's a big, big deal to get a White House internship,” said Matthew Fehrs, an associate professor at St. Mary's College of Maryland and co-director of the college's Washington Program along with Sahar Shafqat. “I know he worked really hard and that it was really nerve-wracking for months because he didn't know if it was going to happen for him — and then with coronavirus, not knowing it was going to happen.”

The application process consisted of a series of questionnaires and a telephone interview.

“He fit well for us because he actually ticked off a couple of those [requirement] boxes,” Fehrs said. “He had worked [in politics] before, but he hadn't done something that was in line with what he wanted to do after graduation, so this was a great chance to do that.”

Fehrs also added that Mockabee met the required criteria, which included a compelling letter about why he wanted to take part “and that sealed the deal for us.”

The application process also consisted of an essay of the writer's choice. Mockabee chose to write about former Maryland state senator and environmental activist Bernie Fowler Sr.

“I looked into him and what he did and his bipartisanship and his work on the environment,” said Mockabee, who is minoring in environmental science. “He's been a big name in Maryland politics.”

He found out the second time was a charm when he learned he'd been accepted in early March.

“I had my expectations tempered [because of the previous year], so when I finally found out there wasn't much time to be excited because the coronavirus hit not too long after,” he said. “But it was a time where I was so happy that I didn't know how to react and it didn't feel real until I got there.”

While in Washington, Mockabee conducted thorough research of presidential nominees and documented results for future reference, formulated brief biographies on current presidential nominees for use by senior administration officials, and utilized organizational tools to create easy-to-navigate archives of presidential personnel.

“He really got to see, because of the work he was doing, an interesting side of working government,” Fehrs said. “These are skills where if he's interested in working in resources or in a lot of places, will be invaluable to him.”

One of the highlights of his internship was when he and the rest of his fellow interns had a group photo taken with President Donald Trump.

“He talked with us and asked some generic questions,” Mockabee said. “He’s very warm and inviting and wanted us to feel welcomed. I think he is [misunderstood]. I think there’s a certain caricature that’s drawn of him that you don’t really get to see unless you’re with him. It was definitely the experience of a lifetime.”

Mockabee also visited the Oval Office and some of the other 131 rooms in the White House.

“I definitely think the Oval Office was one of the things I won’t forget,” he said. “You see it on TV sometimes and it’s a very worldly known office and where the biggest events in history have been decided. Just being there was cool and for someone who is into history like me and knowing the history behind the desk and how many presidents have sat behind that desk was really surreal.”

Mockabee first became interested in politics after watching the 2015 presidential primaries.

“I think that really got me interested in the political process and how it worked,” he said. “It was really neat how [Trump] spoke and made it easy to understand and it seemed like common sense to me. It all piqued my interest in politics and it took off from there.”

At Northern High School, Mockabee was a member of the Lorax Club and Young Republicans Club in addition to interning for Del. Mark Fisher (R-Calvert) at the Maryland General Assembly.

“I wanted to get some real world experience,” he said.

Mockabee has three semesters left at college before he earns his bachelors of science, and is studying to take the admissions test for law school.

“He’s a great student, he’s bright and he’s sincere,” Fehrs said. “Most of our classes are discussion-based, so he’s ready to get in there and talk about these topics. He’s a really great student to have in class because he adds a lot to the discussion.”

Of Mockabee’s internship at the White House, Fehrs said he thinks “it will help him enormously. We put students in a number of internships where they gain skills, and he certainly gained skills from this experience.”

“It’s probably an experience that no other White House interns will ever have, considering our country is battling a global pandemic and economic hardship at the same time,” he said. “While [COVID-19] has prevented some events from happening, it has also opened up other experiences and opportunities that other people won’t have. And being in the political realm in D.C. has given me some experience.”