Lauren Handy had many reasons to be pleased with her experience as an intern for Sen. Orrin Hatch in Washington, D.C. One particular hour, however, took the cake.

"Waiting outside the Supreme Court for the Obamacare decision was my favorite," said the 20-year-old public relations student at Utah State University, about the Judicial branch’s decision to constitutionally uphold the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. 

"We walked (with) the Senator there. Coming out, we were attacked by reporters and I was instructed to take as many photos as possible to send to the media in Utah. Some interns took an hour out of their day to see everything — a for-fun thing, but also work-based. A very historic day."

Handy’s experience marked the height of the political energy she said she routinely felt on Capitol Hill. A product of the USU Institute of Government and Politics — one of two dozen for this summer’s semester, including 15 in the nation’s capital — the junior said she was seeking an "adventure" by applying through the program. As it turns out, she gleaned more than that.

"(The internship) was so much more than I expected it to be," said Handy, who added that she appreciated conversations with not just Hatch’s communications staff, but with the Senator himself. “I knew it would (be) an experience, but I didn’t know I would enjoy it, necessarily. I thought it would be boring and mundane.”

Handy described how her internship was the best of anyone’s that came through the IOGP chute the past few months, because she worked directly with Hatch’s press staff and interacted with the notorious 36-year federal politician more than anyone else in the office.

"He knew me by name,” she said. “I knew the chief of staff a little bit better. That is where there is a lot of traffic: with him and Sen. Hatch."

Others who worked away from the Hill — or at least at a location that isn’t one of five Congressional office buildings — expanded their understanding of the Beltway interior, albeit in different ways. For Quinn Larson, it was government relations.

Larson’s experience at the American Red Cross helped him understand the nature of seeking solutions in disasters through connecting with a variety of Congressmen and Senators about disaster preparation — an effort that Larson described happens when “there’s nothing going on,” one of two statuses he said the Red Cross operates by. The other: emergency mode. Through relations with the likes of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the national military, the Red Cross sought plenty of outreach, Larson said.

That outreach included ways not always used on the Hill. 

"The cool thing with the Red Cross is that it’s bi-partisan — they can’t take sides," Larson said.

That would include discussions in the likes of the Committee of Ways and Means and Budget Committee, where Larson said its members would discuss and plan ways to donate to a non-profit like the American Red Cross, including the nuts and bolts of tax credits and other provisions.

"It was interesting to see that (Congressmen) weren’t interested (in the Red Cross) because they are blue or red, but how they can help benefit … the American people,” Larson added.

Larson’s further level of understanding cut across other generators of the political energy D.C. offers, including a lesson on how lobbying — though not his preferred professional track — plays an important purpose.

“Their career depends on a lot of other people, so I don’t think they’re evil," he said.

While the experience helped Larson appreciate Washington’s buzz, he said its lack of nativity brings what many within the Beltway describe as “unintended consequences.”

"In D.C., no one’s really a native,” Larson said. "Because of this, you lose this local sense of politics. D.C. is such a big place that it can lose itself. Local politics are more
concerned about themselves. Honestly, I follow it more here (at USU) rather than there."

That’s not necessarily the case for Amy Maxwell, a master’s student in folklore who focused on manuscript preservation and public programs in the Library of Congress. The political energy she felt there, despite also not working in a Congressional office, was well received. Part of it came from learning about funding procedures for humanities like folklore at the state and federal level. Much of it otherwise came from attending many of the seminars offered by the IOGP, which involved political employees sharing their knowledge with interns. The program, she adds, would benefit from adding a speaker who may work in D.C., but isn’t necessarily engaged in political work, as well as the stories of Congressional interns themselves.

“When I first moved there, I thought ‘this is fine.’ It did not hit me how cool it was until later (in the summer), so coming back was rather difficult. It was like, ‘OK, I’m back in Utah,’” said the North Carolina native who earned a bachelor of science degree from BYU. “So I’d love to go back, but, you know, but I’m happy again now that I’m here. If offered to go back there, I’d go.”

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