

IN THE THICK OF AMERICAN POLITICS

Politics rank among the least respected professions, according to a recent Gallup poll. But this has not daunted three Bardians—idealism intact and ready to make their mark—who have entered careers in state and federal government.

In 2007, Betsaida Alcantara '05 joined the staff of U.S. Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ) as press aide. It was a natural step for someone who started her social and political activism as a child, organizing for migrant labor rights, with her father, a minister. Born in the Dominican Republic, Alcantara grew up in Goshen, New York, where her work began on behalf of immigrant workers in the area. “For as far back as I can remember, I’ve always coupled my academics with some sort of action,” she says. While pursuing political studies, Alcantara headed Bard’s student-based Migrant Labor Project, whose mission is to improve conditions for migrant laborers in New York State. As part of the Bard Globalization and International Affairs program, she interned at Central American Legal Assistance. After graduation, Alcantara worked at the Workers’ Rights Law Center of New York in Kingston, until her winning of a competitive fellowship from the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute brought her to Washington, D.C. As a policy fellow, she first worked for U.S. Senator Charles Schumer (D-NY), then for Senator Menendez, who invited her to stay on as staff.

“My day is guided by what’s happening on the Senate floor,” says Alcantara. “One minute it’s a press release on Darfur; next, funds for New Jersey firefighters; then children’s health insurance. I’m reminded daily of what’s at stake.” Alcantara’s responsibilities include monitoring the news and using her fluency in Spanish to translate press releases and deal with the Spanish media.

“As one person, I can’t change the government, but I’m working for a senator who cares about this country and the direction we need to take—and is an effective leader,” says Alcantara. “When I hear him speak on the Senate floor, it makes me proud.”

A “blindly sent” letter asking to work on the presidential campaign of (then) Vermont Governor Howard Dean in 2003 set Pia Carusone '03 on a fast track to a political career. “My time with the Dean campaign, first as an intern, and later as campaign staff, was my first working experience in American politics,” says Carusone, who concentrated on international relations and the AIDS crisis in South Africa while at Bard.

In 2004, Carusone worked on one of Massachusetts’s most hotly contested state representative races. “We lost, but it was my first leadership position and it would lead to more,” she says. “I wanted to manage a federal race, House or Senate, for a candidate whom I could feel passionate about.” She found John P. Sarbanes of Maryland. “He comes from a long family tradition of public service and social justice, so it was an easy fit.” Carusone managed his bid for Congress. Sarbanes won and brought her to Capitol Hill as his communications director and press secretary.



Betsaida Alcantara '05

How has her perspective changed since the 2006 election? “Fifty-one freshmen came in—the biggest class since the mid-’70s, and not your average politicians,” she says. “They were elected because people are fed up with the current course in Iraq, health care, and ethics; they represent a tidal change in the American electorate. You walk the halls of Congress, see these new faces, and think: this would never have happened before 2006. It’s great to be working for a member of that team.”

With the 2008 presidential election looming, Carusone will break into the national scene as communications director for the New Hampshire Democratic Party. “New Hampshire is the ‘perfect storm’ of political action and events, not only because of the primaries, but because of a critical senate race. The voters here are extremely engaged, and it’s definitely where the action is,” says Carusone.

For Matt Wing ‘06, press officer for New York State Attorney General Andrew M. Cuomo, government work was far from his mind at Bard. “My concentration was literature,” says Wing. “My Senior Project was on Flaubert.” Still, working with his adviser, Marina van Zuylen (professor of French and comparative literature), taught Wing to value not only literature’s “big ideas,” but also the nuts and bolts of writing: “Grammar, syntax, sentence structure. She forced me to take complex ideas and express them simply—not to reduce their meaning, but to communicate them better. I look to that every day in my work,” says Wing.

Wing’s baptism into real-world politics began in the New York State legislature. Awarded the New York State Senate’s Richard J. Roth Journalism Fellowship, Wing found himself in the Senate majority press-room, “in a bull pen with five other people, answering phones, writing press releases, talking points, and speeches,” he says. It was a particularly exciting time in Albany, according to Wing: “In my first three months, Eliot Spitzer was inaugurated as governor and an FBI investigation involving Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno was announced. Then there were fights on the budget and campaign-finance reform—everything happened!”

After the fellowship, Wing joined the Attorney General’s press office in New York City. “Working for the state’s chief lawyer requires a different set of priorities than those needed in the legislature,” says Wing. “The focus is on cases that will protect the people of the state.” Confessing that he works harder and longer hours than he did in Albany, Wing sees his new responsibilities as even more rewarding. “When you are part of something you really believe in, work is not the same as just having a job,” he says. “It’s something you want to be doing, and that has been a tremendous benefit.”

—Jan Weber



Pia Carusone '03



Matt Wing '06