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Program marks 30 years of introducing teens to public service



KEITH BEDFORD/GLOBE STAFF

Kylie Webster-Cazeau pored over state regulations during her time in the Executive Office for Administration and Finance.

By Jeremy C. Fox | GLOBE STAFF AUGUST 25, 2015

Sean Cheatum has spent his summer acting on behalf of Attorney General Maura Healey, calming angry consumers who paid contractors and furniture dealers for renovations and bedroom sets that never materialized.

Kylie Webster-Cazeau pored over more than 2,200 state regulations for weeks to aid in Governor Charlie Baker's regulatory reform initiative.

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These are weighty duties for experienced civil servants. But Cheatum and Webster-Cazeau are teenagers, Boston Latin School students who are among the 17 Ward Fellows learning firsthand the challenges and rewards of public service.

As it winds down its 30th summer, the Latin School fellowship program can boast a growing list of alumni who have been motivated to pursue careers in government.

Former fellows include state Representative Adrian Madaro, Boston City Councilor Matt O'Malley, former Menino administration officials Jim Hunt and Ernani DeAraujo, and Cathleen Campbell, an associate justice of the Cambridge District Court.

Vivian Herbert, 17, has spent this summer in the governor's Office of Constituent Services, helping citizens address urgent needs for health care, child protection, and shelter from domestic violence. Many who call are angry or distraught.

"You have to make them feel like you're listening and you're understanding, [which] makes it a lot easier to move on and actually solve their tangible problem," Herbert said. "The best part is when you figure it out, and they're less frustrated. That's when you know you've done a good job."

US Senior District Judge Mark L. Wolf said he and Latin School alumnus Stanley Miller founded the John William Ward Public Service Fellowship in 1986 to guide students to become ethical public servants.

"I had the sense that — to be colloquial — the 'bad guys' often stuck together, covered up for each other, lied for each other," Wolf said. "The good guys didn't take care of each other. The community had not taken care of Bill Ward."

John William Ward was a 1941 Latin School graduate who left the presidency of Amherst College in 1979 to work unpaid leading a seven-member state panel investigating widespread corruption in the awarding of public construction contracts. The inquiries led to prosecutions of state officials and the creation of the office of the inspector general, the country's first such statewide office.

In summing up its work, Ward wrote that the panel was skeptical about the possibility of reforming a corrupt system, but he distinguished skepticism from the cynicism he saw in “both the sentimental, disenchanted reformer and the corrupt, irresponsible politician.”

“Skepticism means that, whatever one’s doubts, one must act as if one can make a difference,” he wrote.



KEITH BEDFORD/GLOBE STAFF

Sean Cheatum handled complaints and negotiated agreements between consumers and businesses while he worked in the attorney general’s office.

After business leaders rejected his bid to lead the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, Ward moved to New York for a low-key job in academia. He committed suicide in 1985, at age 62.

Wolf and Miller hoped the fellowship — which includes a modest stipend, tours of government agencies, meetings with officials, and a trip to Washington, D.C., — would create a network for middle- and working-class students who lack the family connections available to the children of privilege.

“When I was in college, I wanted to get internships with members of Congress,” Wolf said. “My family and I didn’t know anybody, and I wasn’t able to get those jobs.”

This summer, Maddie Kilganon, 19, is an aide to O’Malley, the city councilor and himself a 1996 Ward fellow in the office of then-state Treasurer Joe Malone.

“You got to learn what it takes to work in government,” said O’Malley. “It solidified my desire to want to enter into public service.”



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

The work of John William Ward (left) in exposing corruption led to the creation of the office of the inspector general.

Kilganon has helped draft proposed ordinances and dealt with countless requests from constituents, such as helping to get fallen tree limbs removed after a storm.

“It’s really frustrating for them,” said Kilganon, of West Roxbury, who will begin Suffolk University in the fall. “It’s a little thing, but it’s nice to get it fixed. . . . They’re so happy when it’s fixed, and it’s just a couple of calls from us.”

Cheatum, 18, who also plans to attend Suffolk, is negotiating nonbinding agreements between consumers and businesses in the Consumer Complaints and Mediation Services department of the attorney general’s office.

“You learn a lot of listening skills,” said Cheatum, of Roslindale. “I learned how to listen to them, take down the important information without presenting any bias. It’s our job to be a neutral third party.”

Webster-Cazeau, 17, is working for Rachel Madden, undersecretary of the state’s Executive Office for Administration and Finance. Madden was a Ward Fellow in 1988, working for Lieutenant Governor Evelyn Murphy as Governor Michael Dukakis was running for president.

“It was a very exciting time in the lieutenant governor’s office, and extremely busy,” Madden recalled. “I got to do a lot of research, a lot of briefings, learned a lot about government as a whole.”

Webster-Cazeau and other fellows said their experiences have shown them that there are ways to serve the public beyond the headline-grabbing elected positions — that “bureaucrats” do meaningful work.

Knowing that her efforts could make people’s lives easier has kept Webster-Cazeau enthusiastic, even as she scrutinized lists of state regulations to make sure the thousands of entries were consistent.

“I did understand that it was important, so I didn’t mind doing it,” said Webster-Cazeau, 17, of Hyde Park. “I enjoyed doing it, because it made me feel important.”

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