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Living Monuments: Fighting the good fight

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I sensed their inherent passion and fed off their energy.

Fighting the good fight

I applied for the Truman Scholarship in the late 1980s, at the height of Reagan worship and Wall Street greed. My generation was not particularly public service-oriented. In fact, we were often referred to as the most selfish and spoiled generation in U.S. history.

I was appalled by the country's materialism and by overly simplistic references to other countries as "evil empires." I was therefore delighted to learn of a scholarship program that provided a significant amount of financial support to students who were committed to careers in public service. Ironically, I was studying abroad in the "evil empire" when I got the call to fly to Atlanta to interview for the scholarship.

The scholarship enabled me to finish Furman and get a master's degree from The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies with absolutely no debt. This financial freedom in turn allowed me to move to Budapest, Hungary, immediately following graduate school — and soon after the Berlin Wall came down — where I worked for a non-profit organization developing NPR-style public radio and environmental projects. I made \$250 a month and lived like an average Hungarian. This was one of the most powerful, not to mention utterly enchanting, experiences of my life and simply would not have been possible had I been saddled with student loans.

The scholarship had an even more profound impact on my career upon my return to the United States. I was working in another low-paying, non-profit job in Washington, D.C., and becoming increasingly frustrated by my colleagues in the foreign aid community who did not strike me as genuinely interested in results-based international development and who I thought were wasting limited foreign aid tax dollars. I was considering leaving public service altogether and joining the private sector, where I expected to enjoy the challenge of meeting a bottom line. I resented living hand-to-mouth for a cause I increasingly doubted.

Fortunately, I attended a Truman Scholars retreat during this period of self-doubt and spent a glorious weekend with Truman Scholars from all over the country who worked in a variety of public service fields, including a middle-aged man who was a drill sergeant at a boot camp for troubled children in the Midwest. I was shocked by the large number of "Trumans" who were as beaten down and discouraged as I was.

The weekend was not a downer, however. In fact, it was just the opposite. As I listened to other people's stories and challenges, I sensed their inherent passion and fed off their energy. I was reminded of why the good fights are worth fighting and that people who really give a damn don't ever give up.

That weekend has sustained me for 10 years. There have been moments of professional doubt during that time, especially when I was sent by the White House to Baghdad in the summer of 2003 to help rebuild a country ravaged by a war I did not support.

But I have never once regretted my decision to pursue a career in public service. My career has taken many forms, from non-profit work, to state and federal government service, to the United Nations. I thrive on challenge, and some of the toughest and most worthwhile challenges can be found in public service. Some of the toughest and most worthwhile people can be found there too, especially the Truman Scholars.

— Cass DuRant '89



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