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Sarah Zeller Julian '07

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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All the President's Gifts

Carolyn Hull '08 becomes part of history as staff member of the Obama White House.

Story by SARAH (ZELLER) JULIAN '07

During his presidency, Barack Obama has received some unusual gifts, from a box of 50 boxer briefs sent by soccer legend (and underwear model) David Beckham to a ping pong table courtesy of British Prime Minister David Cameron.

Part of Carolyn Hull's job at the White House is to help organize and keep track of the many gifts received by President Obama and his family.

"As the president and First Family receive certain gifts, I make sure they are properly classified and appraised," Carolyn says. "I also separately handle all the Spanish-language correspondence the president receives. I make sure that these letters and emails receive a proper response or are sent to someone who can help."



Hull is among the White House staff greeting the arrival of Marine One.

A psychology and Hispanic studies double major, Carolyn relies on her Wesleyan education to navigate her job in the Gift Unit, which she has held since 2010. "I did a lot of writing and reading, which are very helpful to me now," she says. "During my time at IWU, I took only one political science class — but I find my psychology classes to be useful in dealing with people every day."

Carolyn's language studies allowed her to take on another major task: reviewing the president's Spanish correspondence. "My don Quijote class with Carolyn Nadeau was one of my favorites, and really helped me improve my Spanish," she says. Her semester in Spain as part of the Madrid Program was another highlight of her Wesleyan experience "and is the reason I am fluent in Spanish."

At IWU, she became active in politics as head of the Students for Barack Obama group. She also interned as an Obama campaign field organizer, traveling throughout the Midwest. After graduation, Carolyn was hired by the Colorado Democratic Party to work on several campaigns and she also developed and implemented a Latino outreach program for Mark Udall's successful U.S. Senate run.

Now in the White House, she has personally met with President Obama and the First Lady. "They are brilliant, down-to-earth people who genuinely have Americans' best interests in mind. Each day (the

President) reads 10 letters from ordinary Americans. These help him stay connected with the concerns of everyday Americans.”

The White House Gift Unit was launched during the Eisenhower administration to deal with the increasing number of items presented to the Chief Executive by foreign officials and U.S. citizens.

Most of the gifts she handles are from people the president meets personally, “including heads of state, foreign officials, elected officials and others,” she says. If a foreign leader gives a present valued under \$350, the president can keep it. Gifts costing more are considered a gift to the American people. The State Department carefully catalogs the worth of each gift, and appropriate items are stored in the National Archives until becoming part of the presidential library.

While the First Family receives a wide variety of gifts from U.S. citizens, “we strongly encourage people to donate to charities instead and help those in need,” says Carolyn. Another tip: forget the fruitcake. Food gifts are immediately discarded for safety reasons.

For those interested in following in her footsteps, Carolyn says, “I highly recommend political internships, regardless of whether students are able to receive credit. I would also encourage current or recently graduated students to apply for the White House internship program and our Correspondence Volunteer Associates program. These experiences are invaluable.”

Carolyn continues to be a bit in awe of being a part of history as a member of the White House staff. “I work with wonderful, dedicated people and feel proud of the work we do on behalf of the president and the American people,” she says. “Being able to walk into the White House as a member of President Obama’s staff is an amazing privilege.”