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IWU Senior Spends Summer as FBI Insider

January 21, 2004

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.-Upon meeting Illinois Wesleyan senior Leanne Lessard, you might not guess that she knows how to work a semiautomatic rifle or to take aim with a Glock 22 handgun. Nor would you guess that she has traversed the hallways of some of the most highly-guarded buildings and been privy to some of our nation's best kept secrets.

Lessard, a history and Spanish double major, experienced these rare opportunities and many more during a three-month long internship with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) at its headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Lessard, who is a resident of Tinley Park, Ill., was working with a law office in Chicago when she came across the summer internship opportunity on the FBI Web site. She ventured to the FBI's Chicago field office to pick up the application, however, she soon learned that the process would take months to complete. In addition to filling out a lengthy application, Lessard had to send a resume, include a letter of recommendation from the dean of students and write an essay, all of which she submitted to the Springfield field office.

The applicant pool was narrowed down to 10 candidates and then cut to five before Lessard was notified in December of 2003 that she was the finalist for the position. During the weeks that followed Lessard underwent an intense screening process. She passed a polygraph examination and drug screening before undergoing a thorough background investigation. "The FBI talked to my parents, family, neighbors, roommate, professors, and anyone I had ever worked for," said Lessard. "They even visited my high school."

Lessard finally received word that she was officially accepted in March of 2004. At the time she was studying abroad in Madrid, Spain, and said, "It was hard to be excited at first because I still had the entire semester living in Spain to focus on."

Lessard was home from Spain for two weeks before she had to leave for Washington, D.C. Once she arrived at FBI headquarters, she was assigned a supervisory special agent to be her mentor during the internship. Her mentor helped her to meet other agents and coordinated activities for her, such as trips to the shooting range.

Lessard spent the first seven weeks of her internship in the counter intelligence division in the analysis unit where she helped to investigate American citizens who had committed crimes against the United States. "Oftentimes these people were selling our country's secrets to a foreign entity," she said, adding that she was able to explore the cases from the initial investigation to the final arrest and prosecution stages. "It was so amazing because I had read about things like this and seen it in the movies, but it had never really clicked that it's real. That was an eye-opening experience for me."

Despite this excitement, Lessard decided that she wanted to try something new. “I had become very familiar with the way cases work so I wanted to see more of what the agents were doing and learn more about the investigative techniques they use,” she said. To satisfy Lessard's curiosity, her supervisor sent her to work at the New York field office for a week. There she shadowed several agents in the organized crime unit. “I could not go along when an agent was doing anything that could put me in danger or would cause me to be sent back to New York at some point to serve as a witness,” she said. “But I was able to accompany agents who were investigating their latest lead.”

After her week in New York, Lessard was transferred to the children's crime unit where she worked for the last three weeks of her internship. In this unit, she met the key agent for the Elizabeth Smart case, who, according to Lessard, taught her many “life lessons.” “He stressed that you cannot save the world, you have to help one person at a time, which is rewarding, but that you also have to keep in mind your other priorities like your family.”

Of all the challenges Lessard faced during her internship experience, the only thing she struggled with was leaving to go back home. “I had been looking forward to the experience for so long, it was so hard to know that it was done.” However, Lessard's FBI experience may not be over for good. She is currently applying to graduate schools where she plans to continue her education in the Spanish language and Hispanic studies, but she is seriously considering returning to the FBI someday. “I would like to work in immigration or borders,” said Lessard, “or in any field where I could use my language skills, but I want a broader base before I apply for such a position.”

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