

Intro: You are on with Career Talks presented by the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs at Georgia Tech a regular podcast featuring students, alumni, and friends of the school offering advice to help you succeed in your career endeavors.

Host: Welcome to Career Talks! A podcast service of the Academic Services Office of the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs at Georgia Tech.

On this episode of Career Talks, we are talking with William Thomas, a fourth-year International Affairs and German major with a minor in Social Justice. Will is speaking to us about his involvement with Let America Vote and Stacey Abrams for Governor, where he worked to increase civic engagement.

So let's get going, Will, can you tell us where you are from, why you decided to attend Georgia Tech?

Will: Yeah, hi, so like was mentioned I'm Will Thomas, a fourth year International Affairs and German major with a minor in Social Justice. I use he/him pronouns. I'm from Norcross, Georgia. So when I was in high school I knew that I wanted to do international relations of some sort and I know I very much I grew up in the Atlanta suburbs and I wanted to get out of, you know, what I thought I knew. So in high school I applied to all of these small, private, out of state, super far away liberal arts schools. And as an afterthought I applied to Tech and U.G.A.. My mom got her Ph D. in chemistry from Tech and I actually I didn't know the Ivan Allen College was a thing really, much less the Sam Nunn school. So I applied as an afterthought, went on one of the regular tours and was the only liberal arts student in the tour and thought yeah no, I'm definitely not going to go to Georgia Tech. My senior year of high school, in the, in the spring I came to one of the shadow days for the Ivan Allen college because at the time college visits were excused absences and it was a way for me to get out of class and the email said there was going to be free food. So I came to that with not really any expectations at all and was totally blown away getting to talk with current students including two students who had gone to Norcross, I randomly ended up with them and some other students that - some of the rising seniors that I knew. Sitting in a German class - actually being able to interact and engage with that - I realized that this was actually a place that I could see myself and that this is a small liberal arts experience with all the resources of a large state school. And as I was finally sitting down to choose colleges my parents reminded me one thought that I had overlooked which is college costs a lot of money and you can't really beat Hope or Zell Miller Scholarship. So yeah.

Host: How did you get involved in local and state politics and how did this lead to becoming the lead intern with Let America Vote and then your work with Stacey Abrams, where you were field intern and then field organizer?

Will: So I would say I was one of many lead interns with Let America Vote - not 'the' lead intern. So I'd always had an interest in politics and social justice. And I really like my story and how it ended up because it took my plans getting completely screwed up and me failing massively to end up Let America Vote, with Stacey Abrams for Governor, and really that's what needed to

happen for me to get on the path that I'm on now. That led to me thinking OK shoot what am I going to do for the summer. So first I thought I was just going to work a couple part time jobs and make a bunch of money, so I started with that and the founder of Let America Vote, a guy by the name of Jason Cantor who's currently running for mayor of Kansas City (so if you're in Missouri, check him out). My mom actually followed him on Twitter and he tweeted out the application to intern with Let America Vote in the first field office. I applied for that and totally forgot about it until I got an email back saying hey we'll do a Skype interview with you. So I did the Skype interview and was offered the position and they basically said yeah you know in two weeks just drive up to northern Virginia and you'll intern with us and we'll find you a place to stay and with supportive housing and it was funny because they actually hadn't found me supportive housing by the time they were supposed to - kind of the big intern convention and training. And they said you know you could just come up late once we find you a spot. But I didn't want to miss out so I just kind of drove up anyway without a place to stay and arranged it so I could stay with my uncle in Maryland who lived an hour away from where we were, but they found me a spot and it all worked out. That was amazing work - I started off just as a basic level intern and that was working to elect candidates who are going to protect voting rights to the Virginia State House and for the governorship in Virginia. And that was, the way they were doing that was boots on the ground field campaigns so knocking on a hundred doors a day five days a week, making calls one other day, taking a day off. And so I mean the way that I got involved with that was OK let me just fill out this application and then forget about it and I ended up there and and you know it came because this other plan I had fell apart. And that was such a satisfying summer. Got to be super close to my coworkers because it was basically college kids from all over the country who came who basically had seen the tweet and filled out the same application - just going out and knocking on doors and what I really like about politics and similarly in the nonprofit world is the way you move up is by getting stuff done - it's much more of a meritocracy and I just, you know, we got to make our own schedules with Let America Vote and I said Well I'm here to do this work so let me come in a bunch and I did and I kept showing up and getting stuff done and they said all right you know we'll move you have to lead intern, you can train people and oversee other interns and do more of the planning.

Host: And this all happened one summer?

Will: Yes yes this all happened in one summer. Got to be good friends with some of the higher ups in Let America Vote and express interest to them in doing similar work in Georgia when I came back and so one of the higher ups - I don't remember his exact position - but he had gone to G.W. George Washington University with the data director of the Stacey Abrams for Governor Campaign. And he connected me with the data director. And I talked with him over the phone towards the end of the summer and basically said I'm looking for a position and hopefully paid and he said well we can't offer you a paid position now. But you can come in just start and train with us and just get going. So that's what I did I came back to Georgia. Did that internship and then also interned with this German cultural center and that was my semester just doing two internships. While I was at that internship with Stacy Abrams for governor showing up as much as possible whenever they needed some things and yeah I can do that. And going above and beyond and you know letting them know hey I would like a paid position

and so that's advice I would give to a lot of International Affairs students or students or anyone listening to this who maybe doesn't have that much experience, is don't be afraid of taking unpaid internships especially you can get class credit for it. Because those connections are how you get to the paid positions. You know in liberal arts that's the way you get those hard skills that you need right because so much of our classes I feel are around developing a worldview. And some of the more generic skills for that's how you pick up the hard skills is by doing those internships and getting real world experience and people will see this person can actually get stuff done let me give them a job. And on the campaign basically made myself indispensable as an intern so I got to the point where I said all right, I need to get paid or I can't do this anymore. And they said yeah cool we'll hire you, will bring on as a field organizer. So I was doing that for a semester for the lead up to the primary and I was field organizer and also was doing four classes at Tech, which was a lot. My contract was basically for twenty-eight hours on the campaign week but typically ended up a lot more. And I made it through all that it was a lot it was we were successful, we won the primary by more than we should of. And that was a lesson that just because I can do everything doesn't mean that I should do everything, it doesn't mean that it's going to be satisfying for me. Because after that semester you know I can look on paper and say wow I was successful with all of this but I felt terrible, basically because I'd been running myself ragged and had been taking the time for self care. And so I changed that I had to take time to look at my values and think, what do I want to do right and you know say to myself I don't want to burn out before twenty five. So let me take some space and keep getting more experience.

Host: So what was your greatest accomplishment?

Will: My greatest accomplishment I think or what to me was the most satisfying was the connections that I was able to make and seeing the people that I was able to bring along with me. Whether that was interns who I trained in oversaw with let America vote from totally on boarding them teaching, knocking the first few doors with them to seeing them going out and knocking out a bunch of turf packets. Or on the Abrams campaign similarly. There was one intern when I interviewed him he was in high school at the time and he is now coming to Tech, School of Public Policy so that makes me happy. But you know his hands were literally shaking when I interviewed him. I just wanted to reach over and pat him on the shoulder and be like it's okay. But you know, I am seeing the growth in him where now he is confident in himself and his abilities and his you know training groups of like twenty volunteers to go out and knock on doors and overseeing them. And you know the interns that I brought on and trained are bringing it in training other interns. And that's also been I think the most satisfying part I'm also ambassador for the Ivan Allen College. I was like I mentioned the Shadow Day and talking of the ambassadors there are the reason why I'm at Tech right now. And I've been able to go back and help out with all the Shadow Days since then and there been students who I talk to when they're prospective high schoolers visiting Shadow Day who then came to Georgia Tech and I you know volunteered their FASET, helped them choose their classes that told me a big part of why I came to Tech is because of Shadow Day and I've. Those same students I've seen them from prospective student to at their FASET, to first-years going through to becoming ambassadors to helping out at those Shadow Days and helping bring in other students.

Host: You did similar work, right, what you did with Abrams and what you do with the Ambassadors.

Will: Yeah, yeah, so I'm I mean I think I'm jumping ahead "how did Sam Nunn School of International Affairs and/or Georgia Tech education prepare you for this experience?" I take a very encompassing holistic view where I can learn something from every single experience that every single interaction, whether or not I treat it like that in the moment is different but I can in retrospect learn something. And with the work that I've done and I hope to doing similar work the most important things the connections that I can make with people and the communication skills with community outreach, with organizing, with being an ambassador. The most important skills for me are my communication skills and when I say communication skills, most of what I mean by that is in talking or writing but it's being able to listen and process and understand what other person is saying or expressing to you and making them feel understood and being able to signal that. That for me has been the most important thing.

Host: That is an important skill to have

Will: Yeah, yeah it is it is and that and the emotional intelligence as well is something that's a lot harder to teach but I'm very glad the Georgia Tech especially within the Sam Nunn School and Ivan Allen College. The relations that I have been able to make have prepared me for this because we do have such a close relationship with everyone.

We appreciate you being with us today and talking about your work with Let America Vote and Stacy Abrams as well as what you do with the Ivan Allen Ambassadors Program and hopefully hopefully other students find this interesting and will become more again engaged this November with the upcoming midterm elections.

Outro: This has been career talks a podcast of the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs at Georgia Tech brought to you by the Nunn School academic services this and other podcast can be found on our website at www.inta.gatech.edu. Thank you for listening.