# Blind Students Belong on Capitol Hill: The Perspective of a Summer Intern in the United States Senate

From the Editor:

Kenia Flores is a senior at Furman University, majoring in politics and international affairs. She has spent the past few summers as an intern in the offices of senators, gaining valuable experiences that strengthen her pursuit of advocacy in all areas of her life. She also serves as 2nd Vice President of the National Association of Blind Students.

I attended my first Washington Seminar during my senior year of high school. My involvement with our advocacy efforts prompted my interest in law and public policy.

 The first class I attended as a shy, quiet freshman at Furman University was Intro to American Government with a professor who is now my advisor. I immediately knew I would major in Politics and International Affairs. Aside from joining the Federation, it is one of the greatest decisions I have made.

 I have been to Capitol Hill many times advocating on behalf of our legislative priorities, but I yearned to walk the halls as a Congressional Intern. I interned in one of my Senator’s district offices the summer before my junior year, and I absolutely loved my experience. District offices primarily focus on casework, and they do very little regarding policy. I fielded calls from constituents, managed our casework database, and assisted constituents in any manner the office deemed necessary.

 I decided I wanted to spend the summer before my senior year interning in Washington, DC, so naturally I decided I would apply for an internship on the hill. I knew I needed to begin the application process early because the summer sessions are the most competitive given that classes are not in session, allowing students to spend their summer in DC. Most Senate offices use a convenient online application portal. I was pleased to find the portal was completely accessible, allowing me to submit my application with ease. I submitted my application in early February, and then the waiting game ensued. I interviewed for the position in mid-April and was notified regarding my acceptance the last week of April.

 Most Senate offices split their summer internships into two sessions, maximizing the number of opportunities for students. I was offered the second session. Unfortunately, this meant that my internship started during national convention. I was forced to make a very difficult decision, and I opted to forgo national convention. I wanted to be with my Federation family more than anything, but I recognized it was important for me to fulfill my responsibilities. Sometimes, living the lives we want means we must make difficult sacrifices.

 I was the first blind intern in the Senator’s office, so it was a learning experience for myself and the staff. If I’m being completely honest, my first day was absolutely awful. I rarely think about the fact that I am the only blind person in a room, but it was all I could think about the first day on the hill. I worried about making a mistake and that it would be attributed to blindness rather than the fact that I was a new intern. The fact of the matter is that we, as blind people, are scrutinized more than our sighted counterparts. I reminded myself I earned the position in the Senator’s office, and I was selected because the staff believed I was qualified.

 I may have been the only blind intern in the Senate (it was lonely at times), but I knew I was paving the way for students to come. Do not allow fear to dictate what you do or do not do. We in the National Federation of the Blind have high expectations of ourselves and of each other because we recognize that blindness does not hold us back. We rise above the low expectations and show the world that we are independent, confident blind people capable of turning our dreams into reality.