

A Day with the Vice President of the United States of America

By Dory Zatuchni, CEO, Jewish Family Services of Delaware

On April 18, 2012, my staff (Scott Michels, Director of Youth Development, Brahmin Jackson, Media Matters intern and case manager, and Tre Bracey, Media Matters intern) and I traveled to Washington DC to film an event supporting the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) legislation and the continuation of federal funding to support victims of domestic violence. The event was held in the massive granite, slate and cast iron Eisenhower Executive Office Building which abuts the White House's West Wing. (The White House's West Wing houses the VP's office and the Situation Room.) The event was a panel discussion moderated by news reporter Paula Zahn with five speakers, followed by presentations by several dignitaries and officials including Attorney General Eric Holder and Vice President Joe Biden. Following the presentations, the four of us would join Vice President Biden for lunch in the Secretary of War's office. Below is a description of that day's activities.

April 18th will be a date that lives in the hearts of me and my staff. The four of us met at the Delaware Stop on I-95 at 5:00 a.m. Brahmin immediately informed me that we had a "situation." It turned out it wasn't so bad. Tre's mom dropped Tre off at the Chesapeake House, one stop beyond Delaware. But a good lesson for our interns: situations are all relative.

Traffic to Washington was close to nil. Who knew! We arrived in DC before 8:00 a.m. and drove directly to the security gate. Well, not really direct. We entered DC from the south side. In more than two decades of driving into DC, I personally have never entered from this direction. But Scott was our navigator. As he already succeeded in getting us to DC before anyone else was on the road, we knew he was on top of it! After circling for another 15 minutes and a little nudging, Scott relinquished his position as our navigator to the blue ball on his iPhone. Eureka! When we passed the Washington Monument, we knew we were close!

At 8:05 we saw the security gate at the Executive Office. We drove up to the small guardhouse and presented the guard with our invitation. He requested our individual licenses. For a brief moment, it was Situation #2. Scott's license was not in his wallet. Aware that our IDs would be requested, Scott had put his license in his shirt pocket and swiftly forgot! But the "aha" moment soon came and we each handed the guard our licenses. The guard then disappeared into his little house. Five minutes passed. Had any of us done something that would deny access to the White House?! The guard returned to our car. Our names were not on his list. Could this be Situation #3 already? It wasn't even 9 o'clock! Scott called our contact. She informed him we were too early; the security system works on the minute. We were early – one hour and ten minutes early!

So we again were on the road, searching for a parking spot on the street. Ten minutes later, we parked in a garage and enjoyed a leisurely breakfast. At 9:15 on the button, we returned to the Executive Office. Brahmin and Tre took their cameras from the trunk and walked to the press corridor. The smiles on their faces could be seen through the now drizzling sky. What's a little rain? They looked great ... so professional. Scott and I proceeded to the little house on E Street again. A different guard greeted us this time. Within seconds we were cleared for entry! We pulled up to yet another security area; the dogs sniffed the car; and then the thumbs up sign. We were in!!! We slowly drove through the parking area, taking photos of the rising security gate, the guards, the street signs in the lot. We were giddy with excitement!

Kellen Suber from the Vice President's staff greeted us at another guardhouse. Bubbly and effervescent, she guided us through the hallway to the South Court Auditorium. A local Delawarean, she regaled us with her stories of service to the Vice President. We were then introduced to Paula Zahn, the moderator of the program. Liz Allen, press liaison for the Vice President led Brahmin and Tre to the back of the auditorium where they set up their equipment, assuring they would have the best view of the event. Shortly thereafter the hordes of cameramen and photographers from the news stations including CNN lined up next to them. They were in seventh heaven, checking their equipment while schmoozing with other professionals. *We are optimistic that this will always be remembered as the specific moment when the door to opportunity opened for Brahmin and Tre!!*

At 10:15, the room began filling with dignitaries and advocates who have been involved in the prevention of domestic violence, supporting victims of domestic violence and eradicating domestic violence for more than two decades. This clearly was an audience filled with individuals, actually heroes, dedicated and committed to eradicating domestic

violence. If tobacco use could be eliminated from restaurants, bars and airports, why can't efforts to eliminate domestic violence be as successful?!

The room was now filled to capacity. But out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed the Attorney General. I poked Scott, noting this was a photo op. He scanned the crowd and knew this would be an impossible task. Swiftly, but very gently, I grabbed Scott and shoved a few folks out of our way. Scott and I posed for pictures with Attorney General Holder and spoke with Lynn Rosenthal, the White House Advisor on Violence against Women. We were on Cloud 9!

And then I met Anne. She was the CEO of Safe Havens. We were just two executives talking. What I did not know at that time was that she was a victim of domestic violence. Our discussion focused on serving vulnerable populations; she did not convey her personal story until she spoke as a panel member.

Each speaker on the panel was more impressive than the next. But it was Reverend Doctor Anne Marie Hunter whose story demonstrated the need and value of VAWA. When she began speaking, a silence enveloped the audience. In her quiet voice, she shed light on the time before there were services for victims of domestic violence, before the passage of the VAWA Act of 1994. In horrifying detail she explained the terror of trying to protect herself against the rage of her then husband. She placed a dead bolt on the front door and another dead bolt on her bedroom doors. These secured locks on her doors would allow her time to escape using a rope ladder from her bedroom window and run. But to where? Before the passage of the legislation, there were no shelters for victims of domestic violence. There were no hot lines to gather support and information. Friends and clergy advised her to give her husband more support so he would be kinder and gentler.

It was at this moment when you begin to understand and appreciate the magnitude of the laborious work necessary to change a culture! Thank you to our local advocacy groups such as the Delaware Coalition Against Domestic Violence who understood the problem, advocated and created awareness. And thank you to the politicians like Vice President Biden who listened, responded and acted!

Sharon Love, the mother of Yearly Love, the young woman who was killed by her college boyfriend, was afforded the honor of introducing Vice President Biden. But with his sensitivity, he thanked her for her courage, a point acknowledged by the audience.

Listening to Mr. Biden is a pleasure. His brilliant public speaking abilities from presentation of facts to the nuances of speech patterns are well known and respected. No one can convey passion better than our Vice President. Rather than repeat his words, his entire speech can be downloaded from www.whitehouse.gov/live.

Following the event, Liz and Kellen moved us quickly across the auditorium, through the hallway and into a room originally used as the Secretary of War's office. This room was recently used for an interview with Rachel Maddow. But this afternoon, the room was clearly set for a meeting with highly regarded dignitaries! The décor of the room originally designed in 1875 included an oriental carpet covering the wood floor, stenciled wall patterns, and gold leaf molding. The dining table was formally set with five exquisite china settings and ornate silver utensils. Scott and I sat next to each other, Brahmin and Tre across from us. The Vice President was at the head of the table.

We were still pinching ourselves, when the Vice President began asking questions to Brahmin and Tre. Very curious about their lives and their pathway to Jewish Family Services, it wasn't until the Vice President had finished his lunch that we realized, we had barely begun ours! We were so enthralled – just being in this room with the Vice President of the United States. And then I knew I was never going to eat that day.

Mr. Biden, upon learning it was Tre's grandmother's birthday asked Tre to dial the number. When the grandmother answered the phone, the Vice President said, "Hi. This is Joe Biden." This could have been Situation #4. But I am pleased to note that Tre's grandmother did not have a heart attack.

Then the Vice President asked Brahmin and Tre if they had any questions. This was the moment we were waiting for. Scott and I had briefed the young men for hours. We studied the Vice President's history. We reviewed his legislative record. We read about his advocacy efforts. We learned about his supporters and detractors. We even knew what the "R" stood for as his middle initial and from where it came. So, Brahmin, feeling very comfortable with his knowledge

base, asked the first question: “What’s it like being Vice President?” And for the next 30 minutes, there were no more questions.

Those 30 minutes were the real gift that day. We learned more about governance and leadership than an entire curriculum of political science, law and history combined could provide. While the Vice President regaled us with his stories, the real message was about his relationships – his love of his family, the rapport with and respect for the President, the friendship shared among the President and Vice President’s families, the camaraderie with those he serves, the commitment to those he represents, and the connections to each of us. And the bottom line: our Vice President still believes he can change the world ... with us! How fortunate for us. Life is good!

I would be remiss if I did not mention JFS’s plans for follow-up. Under the guidance of Scott, who is a brilliant teacher, mentor and very valued member of my staff, Brahmin and Tre will be creating several videos about domestic violence prevention.

*The **Violence Against Women Act of 1994** is a United States federal law. Drafted by the U.S. Senator Joseph R. Biden, it was passed as Title IV, sec. 40001-40703 of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, H.R. 3355, and signed as Pub.L. 103-322 by President Bill Clinton on September 13, 1994. It provided \$1.6 billion to enhance investigation and prosecution of violent crimes perpetrated against women, imposed automatic and mandatory restitution on those convicted and allowed civil redress in cases prosecutors chose to leave unprosecuted. VAWA was reauthorized by Congress in 2000 and again in 2005. It is up for reauthorization in 2012.*