

# View of the Statehouse from fresh, young eyes

I NEVER really wanted an intern. I'm sort of a lone wolf who prefers to work alone. But a friend, Jim Nowlan, pretty much demanded that I take on one of his prized students, Paul Richardson, as an intern this legislative session. I resisted at first, but eventually met with Paul and was impressed.

I didn't know the half of it. Paul has been indispensable to me since January. He wakes up early, goes to bed late, and works a whole lot harder than I did when I was 21. He's smart and a fast learner. He's always on time.

Last week, I asked Paul to write a brief story for me about the lessons he's learned so far. The piece struck a nerve at the Statehouse. I thought you'd like to see it, too, so I asked Paul to expand on the original. Here it is:

After four months under the tutelage of Rich Miller I've been blessed to experience more of the Springfield process than many get in a lifetime. I learn a dozen new things each day.

The Statehouse is similar to a small town: Everyone knows everyone else (or at least knows of them). In this small town, "gossip" is a crucial part of the work.

At the end of the day, most people involved in the process get along quite well. Republicans and Democrats share poker games, dinners, deep conversations, jokes, and family vacations. Before I got here I had bought into the notion of two distinct groups of elephants and donkeys locked in a constant battle. Now I realize that party here is like eye color — often ignored and hard to determine unless looking closely.

Money doesn't dictate everything, but most things. The issues that draw the most legislative bloodshed and attract the lobbying kings are those that involve



**RICH  
MILLER**

cash: deciding who gets more at who's expense. The vast majority of contentious bills are pieces of the never-ending fiscal battle royal between the big interests, from hospitals and lawyers to insurance companies and unions. The Statehouse is a large machine fueled by hundreds of bills determining who wins money and who loses money.

Only the most experienced public officials dare to show true emotion in public. Watching floor debates, press conferences and rallies, it is usually easy to determine whether a politician is speaking from the heart or from the political playbook. Younger officials seem more cautious, careful to say only what they are "expected" to say. The "old bulls" of the General Assembly, worn down by years of frustration and less interested in future climbs up the ladder, occasionally launch into genuine rants. It is only at those moments that I know I am listening to honesty. Brutal, but honest. Long-winded, but honest. Loopy, but honest.

It is genuinely difficult for the average citizen to affect policy-making. I have witnessed the steady drum of Statehouse rallies and been struck with the pessimistic feeling that: "None of this really matters." From education funding to electric rate relief, I can't help but notice that these decisions don't hinge on how many posters are displayed, chants are belted, or feet are stomped. The problems are complex and the solutions are even more complex. Only a few individuals truly know why things happen the way they do. Ninety-nine point nine percent of Illinoisans will never know.

---

**Rich Miller publishes *Capitol Fax*, a daily political newsletter, and [thecapitolfaxblog.com](http://thecapitolfaxblog.com).**