

There's a First Time for Everything! Meeting with Policymakers on Capitol Hill

Trying new things can always be a bit intimidating, and meeting with your elected officials could easily fall into that category. But for Chris Cruise and Jane West, two Fellows in ZERO TO THREE's Leadership for the 21st Century Program, meeting face-to-face with members of Congress and their staff to talk about infant-toddler issues was worth all the nervousness. Chris and Jane attended a policy and advocacy training as part of their ZERO TO THREE Fellowship, which included meetings on Capitol Hill with members of Congress and/or their staff. For Chris, this was his first time ever on Capitol Hill. For Jane, talking about infant-toddler issues with policymakers took on a whole new meaning. Read on to find out more about their meetings with policymakers on Capitol Hill and how it changed their perspective on life and their work.

Before you attended the ZERO TO THREE policy and advocacy training, in what ways had you been interested in public policy or advocated for infants, toddlers and their families?

Chris: I always thought of advocacy as something done by other people. I consider myself to be a practitioner on the front lines, and I didn't realize that I could be an advocate too. I knew that there were things I wanted for the children and families that I worked with, but I was clueless about how to advocate for those changes. I didn't know how to communicate with policymakers or with whom I should even be talking.

Jane: As a journalist and documentary filmmaker, I used to visit Capitol Hill to talk about the issues in the films I was directing; topics like the environment and medicine, which are not my areas of expertise. But this time was my first experience with meetings on the Hill where I felt like I had some authority and knowledge to share. Because of the fellowship at ZERO TO THREE, I'm resurrecting the journalism and documentary filmmaking part of my career and combining it with my interest in infant-toddler issues. It was a totally new experience for me to talk with federal policymakers about the issues that are so near and dear to me.

Tell us a little bit about your experience meeting with members of Congress and/or their staff?

Chris: I was pretty anxious about it. I was even anxious about calling and setting up the meetings. I had never contacted a Senator or Congressman before, and so just the idea of calling Washington, D.C. to try and set up a meeting was intimidating. I thought, "Oh, no way they would take the time to talk to me." But that was not the case. I was very surprised at how responsive they were.

My first meeting was in my Congressman's office. I met with one of his staffers first, and then we both met with my Congressman for about 20 minutes. It was a very comfortable meeting. We briefly talked about home, then what I was doing professionally, and he was very interested in how he could be of help. He listened to my suggestions and was very supportive. It was a great experience.

One of the things I realized during the meeting was that these were "people from home." We share common interests, common experiences, even a common accent. Before this experience, I had no idea that as a citizen, I actually could have those kinds of conversations with my elected

officials. Now, I regularly talk to people about how our policymakers are there for us and that you should go visit them and express yourself.

Jane: As part of our training, I attended four meetings on Capitol Hill, all with Congressional staff. I was fortunate enough to have colleagues with me at those meetings, so I wasn't alone in making my case for infants and toddlers. The staff members we met with had varied experience and knowledge of children's issues, which can make it difficult when you are trying to communicate about something that is your passion. But our Colorado team did a wonderful job communicating our issues, and some of the meetings were very productive. There was one staff member in a Senator's office who was very interested in everything I had to say, and I was able to go into depth on the issues. That was really refreshing.

In what ways have you continued to foster those relationships you established with members of Congress and their staff?

Chris: During the conversation with my Congressman, we talked about what children in our area of North Carolina need, and it was a real give-and-take discussion. He told me stories about growing up near the Cherokee reservation, and I discussed my interest in establishing a [Court Team for Maltreated Infants and Toddlers](#) in my community. It was clear to me that the Congressman took our conversation very seriously. I have continued to stay in touch with one of his staffers to discuss the Court Team project.

Jane: Unfortunately, the staff person who was so interested in our issues ended up leaving her job with the Senator. But nonetheless, it was an eye opening experience to realize that if you are able to connect with someone on Capitol Hill about infant-toddler issues and they value what you are saying, your influence can go pretty deep fairly fast.

Have you seen any direct policy changes as a result of your meetings on the Hill? If so, what were they?

Chris: At my meeting with the Congressman, he asked if there was anything he could do to help with the establishment of a Court Teams project in my community. I told him "yes," and as a result I have been working with one of his legislative assistants to submit a federal earmark request to support the creation of a Court Team in my community.

Jane: Nothing specific has resulted from our meetings yet. But as we were leaving the meeting with my Congresswoman's staff person, we ran into the Congresswoman in the hallway. We introduced ourselves, and she knew we had been meeting with her staffer. She was incredibly enthusiastic, and we had a really nice, quick chat in the corridor that felt mystical, like this is where things get done.

How has this experience changed your policy and advocacy efforts?

Chris: It made me more assertive to ask for things that I believe public policy can address. I wrote to my Senators about the Head Start reauthorization, and I got a nice response from one of them that they heard what I had to say. I'm not sure I changed anyone's mind, but it has made me feel like I have a voice – like I can actually speak up and say something about the children and families with whom I work.

Jane: The training in effective communications that I received from ZERO TO THREE not only helped me in my role as an advocate, but it helped me frame the film that I'm working on as part of my fellowship. I have also taken the lessons I learned through the meetings on Capitol Hill and started applying them to my advocacy efforts during the primary and general elections. I am more focused on which candidates are supportive of early childhood issues, and I have a much better sense of how to ask questions and talk with candidates running for political office about infant-toddler issues.

What advice/guidance would you give to other infant-toddler professionals who might be reluctant to meet with policymakers about these important issues?

Chris: I would say, "don't be afraid." I can laugh about it now, but when I was preparing to visit Capitol Hill, I was very anxious. I'm sure other people have felt the same way, but it's an amazing experience and don't be afraid of it. The other thing is that you should know what you want when you go into the meeting. I went in with specific things I wanted to ask for, and that seemed to really help. Not only was I very focused during the meetings, but I was able to see some concrete policy changes take place because I knew what I wanted.

Jane: I think the first thing I would tell folks is to read the pieces ZERO TO THREE has written about framing early childhood issues. They were really helpful for me, so that I didn't talk about the issues in ways that were inaccessible to policymakers. The second bit of advice is to do your homework. In part that means having some pretty concrete, important anecdotes from your work that you can talk about with policymakers. I felt more comfortable too, because speaking about what I know from my own experience makes me more authoritative. As infant-toddler professionals, you have professional and life experience that is authoritative and valuable to policymakers.

Also, while research and data to present is valuable, it is secondary to the relationship building that goes on when you go to somebody's office – whether in Washington, D.C. or in your state capital or down the street. That lesson really sank in for me. Just as we build relationships with the families and children we serve, we have to build relationships with the people that represent us.

Chris Cruise is a licensed psychologist with Analenisgi of Cherokee NC and has been employed with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians since 1999. He received a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University of Wyoming and a MA in Counseling from East Tennessee State University. Dr. Cruise has worked as a therapist focusing on child and family interventions since 1987 and has practiced mostly in rural and frontier settings in Tennessee, Wyoming, West Virginia, and North Carolina. His professional interests include the delivery of mental health services to families with infants and toddlers, integrated pediatric behavioral health, and Parent/Child Interaction Therapy.

Jane West is a licensed professional counselor and a licensed school counselor specializing in early childhood issues. She runs Heart of the West Counseling, LLC, a company that provides services to families and early childhood programs such as Early Head Start and Head Start. In 2005, she was selected to be a Harris Fellow in Child Development and Infant Mental Health at the University of Colorado's Child Psychiatry Department. She is currently a statewide trainer

for Colorado's Early Childhood Mental Health Initiative and a national fellow for the Leaders of the 21st Century program at ZERO TO THREE. Jane was responsible for shaping the Early Childhood Partners coaching and consultation program and she remains an active consultant with many child care programs in the area. Jane is also an internationally accomplished journalist and an Emmy-award winning producer of documentary films for PBS and the BBC.

The interview with Chris Cruise was conducted on July 21, 2008. The interview with Jane West was conducted on July 8, 2008.

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