

## Mr. Beytes goes to Washington (and if he can do it, you can, too!)

I'll admit it: I've never been into politics. I slept through civics class as a kid, and I've been slack as a voter as an adult. It took the TV show "West Wing" to finally pique my interest in the topic. So when it came time to find somebody to attend SAF's Congressional Action Days (CAD) in DC, I said I'd go.

I've been with *GrowerTalks* for nearly 14 years, and in that time there's always been somebody else willing to make the trip, so it's one of the few industry events I haven't been to. Frankly, I was nervous. Despite now being interested in politics, I still don't really know the lingo (let's see, we have Senators and we have Representatives ... which ones are Congressmen?) or the issues (does "comprehensive immigration reform" mean we send illegal immigrants home or let them stay?). In other words, I guarantee that there is not a single one of you out there who would feel more nervous about sitting in a Capitol Hill office than I was.

But you know what? It wasn't intimidating. In fact, after a couple of visits, it was easy. And I'll go even further. It was fun! Here I was, unsavvy Chris Beytes (fourth from left, trying to tell my fellow delegates that the Capitol is that pointy building behind us) from Batavia, Illinois, not well-versed in the issues, rapping with important staffers and, in three cases, real live Representatives, and

they were nodding, smiling, listening and thanking ME for taking the time to visit! I was influencing the nation's lawmakers! And out on the street, little kids were staring at me in my suit, wondering if I was the president (I didn't tell them otherwise). The whole deal was quite a heady experience.

Of course, I have to thank SAF for the preparation they gave us the day before, and the five members of the Illinois delegation, led by Marvin Miller from Ball Horticulture, who's a CAD veteran. Watching them in action clued me into how you do it: introduce yourself, state your issue, give the details, tell a personal story or two to illustrate your point, and ask them where they stand on the issue. Simple! And I found that, as a storyteller by trade, I'm comfortable telling the industry's story.

Mostly we met with Legislative Assistants (LAs)—20-somethings who graduated with political science degrees. Bright kids, and kids who have tremendous influence over their bosses, but kids nonetheless, which made talking with them easy. After two or three such meetings, I was ready to run for office myself.

The meetings with actual Representatives—Dennis Hastert, Judy Biggert and John Shimkus—were slightly more nerve-wracking, but they went out of their way to put us at ease, telling you to call them by their first name and so on. Denny Hastert's office is in the Capitol, so we had the rare treat of getting

inside that historical edifice. The other offices are scattered throughout a range of buildings on “The Hill” (which is a real hill. Who knew?), so we walked approximately seven miles in 8 hours, with no lunch, in order to see them all. I sat in on 13 meetings myself, and actually got up the gumption to speak a bit.

I share my experience only to encourage you to give it a go yourself. Especially if you run a business and have strong feelings or experiences with any of the current issues, such as immigrant labor. These folks in Washington REALLY want to hear your story. They see so few real people, it’s almost refreshing to them when somebody comes in with a personal story. And you can tell they pay attention to their constituents. We’ve all heard a Senator recall a story about a little old lady who can’t afford her husband’s medicine ... well, that little old lady could be you or me!

So bite the bullet and attend SAF’s or ANLA’s meetings in Washington. Or drop in on your local legislator. Follow up with an invite to your business. You’ll be amazed at the amount of influence you really have, and how much fun it can be to exercise your First Amendment right to tell Washington that you’ve got a beef.