

Testimonial

“I’ll Be Sad When the Last Class Is Over”

An interview with Barbara Kakiris, a candidate for the Certificate in Public Leadership at Brookings

By Jessica Lipnack

“Wait,” Barbara Kakiris says when I ask a question for this interview. “Let me look that up. I keep all the Brookings binders at my desk with my folders marked up. I refer to them all the time.”

Barbara is Conference and Events Manager for NASA’s aeronautic research centers, where she’s worked since she was a Federal Youth Fellow in high school. “I arrange everything from small technical working group meetings to large conventions, everything that supports aeronautics research—whatever they need. Which is why my Brookings courses have been so helpful. I’ve been learning new approaches to leadership, how things really work on the Hill, and how to understand of what change really requires. My learning at Brookings has definitely broadened my scope of personal and professional effectiveness.”

“NASA’s mission is still exciting, the people are smart, there’s a real desire to charter the unknown, to be engaged in space exploration. People believe in it,” she says, describing the atmosphere at work. “When I proposed taking the Brookings program, I got full support from my supervisory chain, and everyone quickly agreed that the public-sector focus of the program would really yield results.”

This coming spring, Barbara will finish the last of the courses required for the Brookings Certificate in Public Leadership (she’ll receive it when she completes the United States and European Union course in Brussels). She’s found both the courses and the people she’s met beneficial to her work.

“In ‘Preparing to Lead,’ they taught us that leadership doesn’t happen just at the ‘boss’ level. When you take on your own cause, you have to know it well, and then you can influence. Brookings has helped me understand how to provide options to people. Brookings is really teaching you how to be a better citizen.”

She describes “Inside Washington” as “absolutely humbling me...As a government contractor, you feel so entrenched in the governmental process that you think you understand it, that you actually know how budgets are distributed. I now understand

how much more administrators need to prepare for going up onto the Hill. Before the course, I didn't understand the intricacy of any of it. It's given me newfound respect for leaders of government agencies. My Brookings courses have encouraged me to be more thoughtful."

When I asked about her experience with an exercise in the course she said, "It wasn't just role playing. It became a real examination of the issues taking a side you may not have taken. And there you are, with boldface names from the newspaper who are sitting around volunteering their time and not taking this lightly." She said she was "stunned by the caliber of people" who served as judges: a former chairman of the Republican National Committee, a senior director of a globally renowned environmental association and a top Washington attorney. "Brookings has the clout and ability to bring people out of their daily lives to provide critiques for us as students."

"Brookings really wants to push you to think in ways that you wouldn't normally. They put me in the group representing the oil companies; they put the oil guy into the environmental group. This is experience you just don't get anywhere else."

And then there's the networking. She's met new colleagues who've stayed in touch. "In every class, I've made friends who've continued to e-mail. The people Brookings draws are so eclectic. Everyone learns a lot from others in the class and then they mix it up at the lunch tables. It's amazing what everyone does, learning why they've become involved in civil service. I've made a real network of friends and business contacts."

Not to mention creating relationships with other NASA folks. "I've met people at other NASA centers whom I wouldn't meet otherwise, people from IT services, engineering, facilities and that's led to networking among all of us, which in and of itself has been a help." An online social network has developed from her class at the Leadership Lab. "Now everyone has access to one another's groups, which has led to friends in common among lots of Brookings colleagues."

"Brookings is satisfying my need for intellectual engagement and learning from others. It's a very diverse, very smart, cultured group, and I'm really, really enjoying it. The staff does a fine job of tying together underlying themes. On the first day of class, you get the syllabus and wonder how will this all play out together to meet the program objectives. They do such a good job of pulling disparate presentations together, tying it into one comprehensive whole."

"I will be sad when the last class is over," she says. "I know that wherever my public service career takes me, I'll have greater confidence as a leader involved with change and greater confidence in myself as someone who knows how to communicate and move others to action."

The courses Barbara will have taken for her Certificate in Public Leadership:

Preparing to Lead 9/11-9/15 2006

Leadership Lab 2/11-2/16 2007

Leading with Integrity 3/19-3/21 2007

Inside Washington 11/13-11/15/2007

United States and European Union 4/21-4/25/2008