

Biden's bidders

2 Kings Park residents reflect on working for Vice President

By SETH WALLACH

For most Americans, going to work every day may seem like a chore. But Kings Park's Stephen Goepfert and Sarah Berlenbach don't really mind the daily grind. After all, they work in a pretty nice office building: 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington D.C.

Mr. Goepfert, 28, is the Assistant to the Chief of Staff in the Office of the Vice President. The title is a mouthful and the job responsibilities keep the Kings Park High School graduate plenty busy. He said the hours are long and fast-paced and the work he does to assist Biden chief of staff Ron Klain is challenging. But Mr. Goepfert is an individual who thrives on stress and said even though his job is tough, he "loves every minute of it."

"I am lucky to walk through the White House gates every day," Mr. Goepfert said. "Working in the Office of the Vice President is an incredible honor."

Growing up in Kings Park, Mr. Goepfert said he always dreamed of working in the White House. He has been interested in politics since elementary school.

"Now that I'm here, I want to make the biggest and best contribution I possibly can," he said. "The opportunity to help people was really what drew me in."

He started in the Office of Presidential Correspondence in July of 2010 where he helped to process the thousands of letters and emails from constituents across the country.

"My passion for politics has only grown stronger over the years but especially since I joined the [Obama] Administration [five years ago]," he continued. "Reading their stories shaped my opinions and political beliefs, and showed me the real impact policy-making can have on someone's life."

Even though Mr. Goepfert has since moved on to bigger and better things,

a large part of the correspondence coming to the White House is still in very capable hands. Sarah Berlenbach, 23, a fellow graduate of Kings Park High School in 2009, currently works alongside Mr. Goepfert as the Associate Director of Correspondence for Mr. Biden.

"It's an honor," she said. "It feels good to come to work every day working for something and someone you really believe in."

Ms. Berlenbach said she feels as though she represents her little part of the world at the White House: her friends, her family, and her hometown community of Fort Salonga and by extension, Kings Park.

Mr. Goepfert has deep roots in Kings Park. His family moved to the close-knit Smithtown community in 1992, when Stephen was enrolled as a first-grader at Park View Elementary. After graduating from Kings Park High School in 2004, Mr. Goepfert attended George Washington University, where he studied political science. In 2008, he joined up with the presidential campaign for then-Senator Barack Obama in the swing state of New Hampshire, where he served as a Field Organizer. He remained with the Obama campaign during the Democratic primary and through the general election. After President Obama was elected, Mr. Goepfert moved back to Kings Park in 2009 and joined the Smithtown Democratic Committee. Committee Chairman Ed Maher said Mr. Goepfert has been a wonderful member and a valuable addition to his team, adding that he is incredibly proud of Mr. Goepfert for landing a job at the White House working for Vice President Biden.

"Being a Democrat in Smithtown isn't easy," Mr. Goepfert said, alluding to the Town's voter demographics as a prominent Republican stronghold for Long Island. "However, these committee members are some of the



HIGH HONOR: Kings Park High graduates Stephen Goepfert and Sarah Berlenbach in Vice President Joseph Biden's ceremonial office in Washington D.C.

most passionate and dedicated people that I've ever met, and that's coming from someone who spent a lot of time with volunteers during the 2008 campaign in New Hampshire."

Like countless members of her generation from across the country, Ms. Berlenbach got involved in politics during President Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, volunteering at a phone bank and knocking on doors.

"Although I felt invincible as a young person—thinking that politics didn't shape my world—the months leading up to November 4, 2008 put things in perspective," she said, referring to the day President Obama was first elected. "[It] made me realize how much things like health-care costs mattered to my middle-class family and community."

After graduating from Kings Park, Ms. Berlenbach attended The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, spending time as a Summer Organizing Fellow for Organizing for America (OFA)-New York, the Obama re-election campaign's New York arm. The position helped land her a spot in the coveted White House

Internship Program. During a visit back home to Fort Salonga, she joined the Smithtown Democratic Committee, an organization she raved about for its commitment to helping people at a grassroots level.

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Although the two members of Mr. Biden's staff are kept pretty busy, Mr. Goepfert said he tries to come home and visit Kings Park whenever he can to visit his family, whom he said still lives in town for the most part. Ms. Berlenbach has bounced around from Long Island to North Carolina to New York City and now Washington D.C. over the last few years but said that although she enjoys her time in the nation's capital, Fort Salonga and Kings Park will always be her home.

Superintendent seeks audience with congressional delegation

By DAVID AMBRO

Kings Park Superintendent of Schools Dr. Timothy Eagen is attempting to engage the Long Island congressional delegation in a discussion about the future of public education in New York.

Thus far however, Dr. Eagen's attempts have fallen on deaf ears but he intends to keep trying.

Dr. Eagen contends that federal public policy related to teacher evaluations and student high-stakes testing are not working and that public schools are being seriously underfunded by the state. He also concludes that public policy has unfairly undermined the teaching profession and that a new approach is needed.

Dr. Eagen sent a three-page letter February 23 to State Senators Charles Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand and

Long Island's five-member delegation in the House of Representatives: Steve Israel, Lee Zeldin, Peter King, Kathleen Rice and Gregory Meeks. In the letter Dr. Eagen concludes that federal policy related to public schools is not working and he questions what the future will hold.

"Rather than moving forward with bold instructional initiatives, our schools are now caught in a bog of nationally developed standardized tests and misguided notions of accountability and teacher evaluation," Dr. Eagen writes.

He seeks an audience with federal lawmakers to discuss his concerns.

"I personally cherish our democracy and the public school system that has so long been the backbone of this great country," says the Eagen letter. "I would love to sit with you at some

point to elaborate on my thoughts. I look forward to that opportunity."

At the Kings Park School Board meeting Tuesday, March 10 a resident in the audience congratulated Dr. Eagen for his letter and asked what the result was. Later in the meeting, to accentuate his concerns, the superintendent read excerpts from his letter.

At last week's meeting and again during an interview Monday, March 16, Dr. Eagen said he has not received a reply from any of the seven lawmakers he sent the letter. "I have yet to receive a reply from any of them, which does not surprise me," Dr. Eagen said, during a telephone interview from his office Monday. "I do anticipate following up with the delegation with more information about feasible ideas for change."

Dr. Eagen said he doesn't think federal officials receive enough feedback from the educational community and that it is his endgame to engage them in meaningful dialogue about "real-change options" Congress should consider moving forward.

He said that one critical issue for federal lawmakers to tackle is the student testing and the "one-size-fits-all approach," which has resulted in the growing opt-out movement. "I agree with the need for standards and I understand that we need globally competitive standards, but it takes children different lengths of time to get to those levels," Dr. Eagen said.

Rather than a standardized approach, Dr. Eagen advocates for adaptive tests that assess where a child is academically and then evaluates outcomes. "This

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