

Eagleton alumni share advice for pursuing political careers



Photo by [Courtesy of Amanda Marziliano](#) |

Four Eagleton Institute of Politics alumni convened in the Wood Lawn Mansion on Douglass campus yesterday evening to discuss their careers and dispense advice for current students.

Years ago, when Christopher Paladino sat at the end of a conference table with future Gov. Chris Christie, Paladino joked with him about when they would order pizza.

They were both working at the same law firm and would both eventually go into politics.

Paladino, a 1982 undergraduate associate of the Eagleton Institute of Politics, talked to students yesterday about the career path he took before his current position as president of the New Brunswick Development Corporation.

On yesterday's panel for "Eagleton Institute Alumni Panel: Careers in Politics," four Rutgers alumni shared their work in politics at the Wood Lawn Mansion on Douglass campus.

The speakers were alumni of Eagleton, which hosted the event.

Kristin Phillips-Hill, an undergraduate associate in 1988, was a full-time volunteer in her community before becoming the State Representative-Elect of the 93rd District of Pennsylvania.

"There was a lot of unrest in our school district, a lot of spending," Phillips-Hill said. "People were worried about the constantly escalating school property tax, [and] there didn't seem to be a correlation between the spending and the quality of education."

One of her opponents was backed by the Tea Party, and the other by the teacher's union, which at first made Phillips-Hill feel less optimistic about her chances.

After realizing her uniqueness as a candidate — she wasn't held to any one group's interest — she gained more confidence and began campaigning door to door.

"My father said to me the night of the primary election, 'You've been preparing for this job your whole life,'" she said.

Christine Stearns, a fellow of the institute in 1996, is now vice president of health and legal affairs at the New Jersey Business and Industry Association.

“Learning about ... how those factors come together in how policy is created at the state house, it is a balance of trying to figure out good politics and policy and hoping it all lands in a good place,” Stearns said.

Abdur Yasin, a fellow of 2013, is now fire captain of West Orange Township in New Jersey.

When he first became a fire fighter, tensions existed around employee contracts, and Yasin quickly became involved in representing public employee interests.

“We all remember 2008 and the financial collapse,” he said. “Right around that time, the 2 percent cap came out, and we were facing another contract.”

After the difficult process of negotiating contracts with other members of a panel, Yasin applied for a graduate degree in public policy at Rutgers.

“We ended up saving the jobs, and after that, I said I didn’t want to face this type of problem again,” he said.

Ruth Mandel, director of Eagleton, gave students the advice of taking advantage of the extensive alumni network.

“Don’t let an opportunity go by,” she said. “If there’s someone here who can be helpful to you, talk to them before they leave at the end of the night.”

Other advice included practicing good writing, communication and interpersonal skills. Yasin strongly emphasized soft skills, which are most influential in politics.

“The network that I gained access to by having been part of the Eagleton program have been invaluable to me in the years,” Stearns said.

Paladino pointed out that maintaining positive relationships in politics is especially vital because many politicians will continue working together for a long time in their careers.

“Look around this room: Most of you probably won’t drift far from New Jersey,” Paladino said. “So be nice to each other, because they’re not going away,” he joked.

Phillips-Hill encouraged students to be honest, because politicians should not represent the interests of other politicians, but of their voters.

“People will respect you more, if that’s your position,” she said.