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Trey Branham gets a senator's job done

by BECKY BULL

Strom's Right-Hand Man

While his friends spent their senior year spring break at beaches and at bars, Charles "Trey" Branham knocked on doors on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. Interested in politics, he wanted to work in the belly of the beast.

A family friend arranged an interview with Sen. Strom Thurmond, who had an opening on his staff. Thurmond only hired people from South Carolina, and Branham's Hilton Head roots helped land him the job. "I was hired on a trial period," Branham says. "Six weeks and my salary was \$12,000."

Branham worked in constituency services, which was a high priority for Thurmond. While most senators emphasize legislation, Thurmond emphasized helping the people of South Carolina deal with the federal government. Branham was a natural at the job and it helped hone many of the skills he uses today as a trial lawyer at the Law Offices of Charles Branham in Dallas. He dealt with a variety of people, listened to their problems, found solutions and advocated on their behalf to federal bureaucrats.

"One thing you learn about talking with constituents is there are all kinds of people and problems," says Branham, 37. "Sometimes the requests seemed simple, like finding out why a Social Security check never arrived. But the solution could be maddening, like finding a needle in a haystack." Sometimes Branham would get on the phone and work his magic, but sometimes he had to go straight to the top. "If I couldn't get an answer I would walk in

and tell Senator Thurmond," Branham says. "He would pick up the phone and call a secretary and find out where the Social Security check was. When I was there, the senator was an advocate for you—no matter who you were."

After his trial period, Branham's salary bumped up to \$24,000. His day was grueling, often starting at 8 a.m. and ending at 8 p.m. But Branham says he and his friends "lived like kings." Thurmond tried to make Washington fun, often taking his staff to dinners and receptions. Branham sometimes drove the senator home at night.

Claudia Diaz de la Portilla, who worked as a legislative assistant to Thurmond at the same time, says Branham was one of the senator's favorites. "He always said of Trey, 'That's my boy,'" Diaz de la Portilla says. "The senator recognized Trey's capabilities very early."

Thurmond went home most weekends and at Monday morning staff meetings, Diaz de la Portilla says he pulled cocktail



Branham with two of his friends not interested in politics.