

Serendipitous journey

Smith's career path to Lansing includes White House stop

BY BARBARA WIELAND

Lansing State Journal

The word "serendipity" has a special meaning in Brigham Smith's life.

Serendipity is the act of making a discovery by accident. In Smith's case, that means falling into a job at the White House, or finding a spot at Harvard Law School without much effort.

The 30-year-old attorney at Honigman, Miller, Schwartz and Cohn LLP's Lansing office has a resume that includes a job as a radio DJ and work as a White House staffer.

"It was being at the right place at the right time," said Smith, who grew up in Perry.

Smith's strange journey began shortly after he graduated from the University of Michigan with a degree in political science and history.

He was interested in going to law school, but first wanted to get some experience in the real world.

A DJ at the university's student radio station, Smith found work at an Ann Arbor rock 'n' roll station. The job brought perks, such as concert tickets, T-shirts and other freebies.

"All the swag you could want," Smith said.

That was his night job. During the day, Smith worked as a legal assistant.

When his girlfriend graduated and moved to Washington, D.C., a year later, Smith decided to go, too. The relationship didn't last, but Smith wasn't ready to leave the nation's capital.

An acquaintance who was a White House intern asked Smith to work on a conference on hate crimes. Smith, with time on his hands, took part in the project on a volunteer basis.

Then, a job opened up inside the White House. He was hired to work as an assistant to the deputy director of personnel. He was just 23 years old.

"I'd pinch myself everyday I walked in and walked by the Secret Service," Smith said.

Among Smith's jobs was processing requests for ambassadorial appointments. He worked alongside Michael Zeitlin, who remains a friend to this day.

Though Smith didn't have much political experience, Zeitlin said he quickly took to the job.

"He's got great common sense and good communications skills. Those will take you just about anywhere, but especially in that environment," Zeitlin said.

"He's also one of the most genuine people I've ever met in politics. There are a lot of phonies, but Brigham wasn't one of them."

Smith's job was incredibly demanding, but it also brought unusual perks, such as introducing his parents to the president.

"He was unbelievable," Smith said of President Clinton.

"He was unbelievable. Phenomenally talented and charming. An unbelievable listener."

Brigham Smith
On President Clinton

"Phenomenally talented and charming. An unbelievable listener."

Smith's job also offered him a front seat to history.

Soon after he hired in, the Monica Lewinsky

scandal started to break. And Smith's boss, Marcia Scott, was among those called to testify before the grand jury.

"My boss facilitated (Lewinsky's) move from the White House to the Pentagon," Smith said.

While those heady events unfolded, Smith received some life-changing news of his own. He was accepted to Harvard Law School.

For most aspiring lawyers, going to Harvard Law would be a no-brainer. But Smith wavered between staying at the White House and going to the prestigious school.

Scott made his decision for him.

"She told me in her Arkansas drawl, 'If you don't quit, I'll fire you,'" Smith said.

After the excitement of working in the White House during a major scandal, Smith didn't feel as much pressure as other students might.

"I figured, what's the worst that can happen? You get a B,"



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Winding road: Attorney Brigham Smith is shown in his office in Lansing near a Batman poster (he's a fan) and a picture of himself with President Clinton in the White House — one of several turns his career path has taken.

Smith said.

Harvard is where Smith met his wife, Janice Keays Smith.

Though he's worked inside the White House and attended Harvard Law, his wife is "the best thing that ever happened to me and the absolute love of my life," he said.

After the pair graduated from law school, they moved to Lansing to work at Honigman, Miller.

Family brought Smith home.

When he began work at the law firm, Smith could look out his window and across a courtyard into his mother's office.

The two would wave at each other.

"You can't replace that," he said.

In his off time, Smith enjoys comic books and video games. His favorite character is Batman.

"Of all the superheroes, he's the only one who could really exist," Smith said. "He didn't have any superpowers. He was just a

The Smith file

- ▶ **Name:** Brigham Smith
- ▶ **Job:** Attorney, Honigman, Miller, Schwartz and Cohn LLP
- ▶ **Age:** 30
- ▶ **Previous jobs:** Rock 'n' roll DJ, White House staffer
- ▶ **Education:** Bachelor's in political science and history, University of Michigan; Harvard Law School
- ▶ **Family:** Wife, Janice Keays Smith
- ▶ **For fun:** Comic books and video games, participating in local politics
- ▶ **On going to Harvard Law School after working in the Clinton White House:** "It was a blast. There was very little pressure. I knew that this was not the real world."

man."

But as Smith himself knows, the most extraordinary things can happen to an everyday man.

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