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Obama taps Lu '88 to help run transition

By Cornelia Hall • Staff Writer • November 7, 2008

Chris Lu '88 will serve as executive director of President-Elect Barack Obama's transition team, the campaign announced Wednesday.

A Wilson School major and former senior news editor of The Daily Princetonian, Lu has been working for Obama since he took office as a U.S. Senator in 2005.

A classmate of Obama's at Harvard Law School, Lu worked for a law firm immediately upon graduation. But he soon found his way into public service, developing a career out of a fierce work ethic, ambition and a passion for politics, those who know him well said.

"I ended up on Capitol Hill, where I've always wanted to be," Lu said in an interview Thursday.

He first served on the Democratic staff of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform of the House of Representatives and later worked as a special adviser to the presidential campaign of Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.). Lu joined Obama's Senate office in 2005 as legislative director and took on significant duties from the start.

Lu's day-to-day responsibilities included handling "every bill that [Obama] introduce[d] and every vote that he [cast], every speech he [made], and how he [spent] every minute of every day," he explained.

"It's one of the most fun jobs in the Senate," Lu said. "It's also an incredibly difficult job because you have to know something about any given thing going on in the Senate at the time ... It takes a couple years off your life."

When Obama announced his presidential candidacy in February 2007, Lu did not move over to the campaign. Instead, he remained in the Senate and "continued to run operations," he said.

“[Obama] knew that that was an important thing,” Lu said. “Even while he was running for president, he had a day job.”

While Lu would not divulge specifics of the internal workings of the campaign, he said he had a conversation with Obama last summer about the transition planning effort.

“[Right now we] have a lot of really smart people working on [the transition], choosing nominees, getting a handle on different government agencies,” he said. “My job is basically to keep the trains running on time.”

While the media has speculated on Lu’s eventual role in the Obama administration, Lu said that he hasn’t thought about his next job.

“I’m flattered by all the speculation, but I also know that that’s exactly what it is,” he said.

Still, Lu noted that he “will happily serve Obama in whatever capacity he asks. I believe in him, and I believe in his message and the change that he is going to bring to this country.”

Lu’s senior thesis adviser, former politics lecturer Tony Broh, said Lu is a perfect fit for whatever role Obama asks him to take.

“It’s not surprising to me that he works as well as he does with Barack Obama because [Lu] stays on topic and is willing to persist with carrying a project to completion,” Broh explained.

“Back in college, it was pretty clear that he was interested in a political career,” Mark Wenger ’88, Lu’s roommate for three years, said.

“I actually thought he would wind up as a senator.”

“He was an outstanding student. He always seemed to have all this extra time,” Wenger added. “He was a very socially astute person as well [and] always seemed to be connected with a lot of friends.”

Lu confirmed that Wenger’s instinct was right on target. “I basically always wanted to be in politics,” he said, explaining that interning in the Capitol Hill office of Sen. Charles Mathias (R-Md.) after his sophomore year at Princeton “really cemented my interest.”

Broh said he recalls Lu’s admirable determination in college. “[Lu was] very, very methodical, very smart and quite attuned to the work that he was doing,” he said.

Lu's thesis focused on press coverage of presidential campaigns and involved content analysis of newspaper articles and press items. His research involved tedious work, Broh said.

"[Thesis research] requires commitment and dedication to the scholarly process. It requires interest in being on the cutting edge of research. It requires conceptualization, organization ... and so all of these characteristics were things that would serve him well in the kind of role that he has been taking," Broh added.

Lu's classmates said they remember not only his work ethic but also his congenial personality.

Wenger, who called Lu "a lifelong friend," said his former roommate is "the nicest, most generous guy in the world."

"I'm so happy that Chris is one of the folks that might help figure out what's going on in the White House because he's just so conscientious about his work. He's so honest and hardworking and whip-smart," he said. "He just works really hard and cares a whole lot about the country and what he's doing."

"He's such a warm people-person ... [and] had a very winning personality," said 'Prince' production supervisor Brian Smith, who worked with Lu during Lu's tenure as senior news editor.

Craig Bloom '88, Lu's former classmate and 'Prince' colleague, noted that Lu has kept up his interest in his classmates by serving as the class secretary for the Princeton Alumni Weekly since they graduated in addition to serving as a member of the 'Prince' board of trustees.

"[That] says something about his commitment to the Princeton community," said Bloom, who is also a member of the 'Prince' board of trustees.

Lu served on the board until about a year ago, when the time commitment of the Obama campaign led him to take a leave of absence.

He recounted his tenure at the paper as an experience that prepared him for his current responsibilities.

"I learned to write, to think quickly, to meet deadlines, all at the 'Prince,'" he said. "It was really the best education I ever got."

For now, Lu said that he is focusing on serving Obama as best he can.

Obama is "as thoughtful and kind and decent and as intelligent a person as he is in private as he is in public," he said. "I'm in awe of the man and I think he's going to be a fantastic president."