The Justesens in the White House

The careers of Troy and Tracy Justesen are remarkable: they both had stints in the White House. Both shaped national policy before returning to Utah earlier this year. Soon they will jointly receive the Center for Persons with Disabilities’ Trainee of the Year award for 2009. Tracy Justesen earned his Masters degree at Utah State and two law degrees from Drake and George Washington universities. He was president and CEO of the nation’s largest independent living center and joined the US Department of Education as a career program specialist. Also in Washington, D.C., he worked in the Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division. He chaired the United States Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board. He was associate director of the White House Domestic Policy Council and assistant secretary for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. And through it all he never forgot the patience and respect that he found as an employee at the CPD. "My experience at the CPD was one of the best experiences I've had in my professional career," said Tracy. "I was your quintessential kid who knows nothing and thinks he knows everything." But he said people at the center always helped him figure out what he was doing and treated him with respect. His brother Troy's pedigree is equally impressive. A Utah State bachelors’ and masters' degree graduate, he is now the Vice President at Salt Lake Community College. He earned a doctorate in higher education policy from Vanderbilt. He worked as an investigator enforcing civil rights laws for the US Department of Justice and in the White House as the associate director for domestic policy--two years before his brother had the same job title. He was the deputy commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration, acting deputy assistant secretary of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, and acting commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration. Before leaving Washington he was the assistant secretary for vocational and adult education. His experience has led him to say that people with disabilities are an underused resource in the United States. He puts it bluntly: "I know there are many jobs that I could have had if I didn't have a disability. ... I think a lot of people with disabilities are written off because of their disability." For Troy, Utah State was the exception to that rule. He enjoyed the respect he received on campus and as a CPD employee. He likes community colleges because they bring higher education to people who would not otherwise receive it, but he misses Utah State. In interviews, both brothers offered glimpses into Washington life. Though he was a trial attorney in the Justice Department, Tracy said most issues he worked on were resolved without going to trial. "Nine times out of ten you take care of the issue out of the courtroom." Troy described his experience making policy this way: "It's like vegetable soup. You've got noodles in it, you've got carrots, you've got peas, you've got beef." Timing is important: the key is knowing when to add each ingredient to make sure a good cup of soup is served. "You have to sit back and spend a lot of time learning how to do this, and then you might find out you were supposed to be making spaghetti." The bottom line: each state has its own challenges, and what's good for Utah may not work in Louisiana. Their career paths were similar in some ways and divergent in others, but both say their experience with grant writing at the CPD was important. Troy said he learned how carefully grantees read the language of a request for a proposal. This knowledge came in handy when he was the one writing RFPs. Tracy said his grant-writing experience was useful when the Justice Department decided to issue grants to educate the public about the Americans with Disabilities Act. It was the first time the Department of Justice issued grants in that way, but because of his experience at the CPD Tracy was up to it. People who worked with them at the CPD remember both twins as smart, hardworking and ambitious young men. "They were both so knowledgeable and professional," said Sharon Weston, the administrative
assistant to the director who knew them when she was working in the Utah Assistive Technology Program. "I knew they were working hard, they were working on their Masters degrees and crowding an almost full-time job into that." Even then, both twins were talking about working in Washington and at the White House. "They were so bright. ... They knew where they wanted to go and they went for it, both of them." Former CPD Director Marvin Fifield said, "Both of the boys had a lot of energy. ... We just really enjoyed them at the center." "I think it's great that two twins from a little tiny town in Utah were able to work in the White House and really make a difference," said Marilyn Hammond, who worked with both men--though at different times--in the Utah Assistive Technology Program. "It's been a pleasure to know them."