

The Daily

Princetonian

Long time Obama aide and long time writer of classmate news: Chris Lu '88

By Jacob Donnelly • Staff
Writer • April 20, 2014



On April 5, 1988, at 2:27 a.m., Christopher P. Lu '88 put the finishing touches on his senior thesis, wrapping up the cover letter to his cheekily-titled research project, “The Morning After: Press Coverage of Presidential Primaries 1972–1984.”

The subject of birth was evidently preoccupying him at the time.

“In many ways, writing a senior thesis is like having a baby,” he wrote. “The idea for the paper is conceived one day unexpectedly and then gestates inside one’s head for nine months ... I now submit this thesis like a proud father, confident that it will stand on its own two feet as a piece of scholarly research.”

However, Lu, this year’s Baccalaureate speaker who is a former White House Cabinet Secretary and the current Deputy Secretary of the Department of Labor, had no idea then that his forays into politics and government, rather than over, were only in their embryonic stage. He would remain attached to Princeton as well, serving on the board of trustees of The Daily Princetonian, helping the University’s trustees navigate Washington and diligently keeping up with classmates in order to feature them in the pages of the

Princeton Alumni Weekly.

“We weren’t totally uncool:” At Princeton

Jane Martin '89, a former sports editor for the 'Prince,' remembers Lu as a senior news editor for the 'Prince,' a fellow member of Cloister Inn and a good friend.

"It makes me laugh just to think about him, just because he was always making me laugh," she said. "He was the kind of guy who could argue with you all day long, completely skewer what you were saying and make you laugh at yourself while he was doing it."

At one point, Martin and Lu both lived in Cloister with a group of friends.

Martin characterized Cloister at the time as a club for people who might have been comfortable in a bicker club but weren't.

"We weren't totally uncool, let's put it that way," Martin said, laughing. "It was a fun group, we played mini golf, I have pictures of us going bowling. Chris was one of the more responsible of the group. He would cook." She added that, when she was bedridden with flu once, Lu checked on her continually and offered to make chicken soup.

It was as a fellow Wilson School student that Karen Bowdre '88 first met Lu, and she also remembered him positively.

"I remember talking with him about international affairs," she said. "He was always very focused, had a great sense of humor."

Bowdre remembered, however, that Lu might have been less memorable to some of his classmates due to a matter of names and chance.

"He was always very kind and very quick-witted when people would mix [him and Donald Lu '88] up," Bowdre said. "They both went to Princeton, they both graduated in '88, [and] they both went to the Wilson School."

It so happened that Donald Lu was USG president, according to his Nassau Herald entry.

When asked about the matter, Don Lu said that an alumnus who visited him recently in his office in India mistook him for Chris Lu.

Chris Lu himself said the most formative part of his University experience was writing for the 'Prince.' Memorable stories include reporting on University President William Bowen's retirement and Harold Shapiro being named as the replacement, alumna Sally Frank '80 filing suit against three eating clubs for accepting only males into their membership, going up into a glider while covering the "Princeton Soaring Society" and using his press pass with another news editor to get into the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City.

"Our press passes looked like we literally ran them off at Kinko's," Lu said. "We were wandering right by the stage as the pageant is going on. It was one of the more hilarious things we did."

Lu added that 'Prince' alumni from the period often joke that former production manager Larry DuPraz was their favorite professor.

"We learned how to be good editors, how to be good writers, how to make deadlines," Lu said.

Lu also said that the Wilson School does a good job at recognizing the reality that policymakers can't just be experts in one particular field but need a broad range of knowledge and experiences to be effective.

Lu was a skilled writer and debater even before matriculating, according to Charlene Huang Olsen '88.

“He was an incredible debate guy. We did not go to the same high school, we went to rival high schools, and he was really, really good,” she said. “Our parents were good friends, and my mom and his mom in particular, and he and I attended a Chinese school on the weekends to try and learn Chinese.”

Lu recalled in an interview with Asian Fortune, a magazine focused on Asian-American issues, that his dad, an engineer, “was a history buff and a political science buff and I think that’s where I got my interest.” The two would read biographies of politicians and watch the evening news together, Lu said.

Lu’s interest in journalism and politics led to his senior thesis examining how media decisions affected the narrative surrounding the presidential primary election process. He concluded among other things that earlier primaries were more likely to be covered by longer articles and accompanied by a photograph and that the expectations of longer, evaluative articles that expressed an opinion as to “momentum” or expectations of victory were surprisingly predictive of the eventual outcome of the election.

Some of Lu’s conclusions bore striking relation to his future work in politics.

“The selection of presidential nominees is a critical point — some would contend the most critical point — in the process of democratic governance in the United States today,” Lu wrote. “Press expectations are critical to the success or failure of a candidate.”

Lu’s intellect and work ethic helped his senior thesis turn out successfully, C. Anthony Broh, his thesis advisor, said.

“You may read an entire article, and there was only one data point on what it is that you’re interested in, so it takes a considerable amount of time,” Broh said. “It’s meticulous, methodical, conceptual kind of work that needs to be done, and Chris displayed all of those attributes, not only in his research, but also in his person.”



“The truth came out”: Life in government

After graduating from Harvard Law School in 1991, clerking for a federal judge in Chicago and working for the law firm Sidley Austin in Washington, D.C., for four-and-a-half years, Lu worked as deputy chief counsel on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee from 1997 through 2004.

Phil Barnett '79, Minority Staff Director for the committee, remembered Lu's work investigating Republican allegations of campaign finance violations by Bill Clinton's 1996 presidential campaign in particular.

“What he really did was to make sure witnesses, people brought before the committee ... were treated fairly,” Barnett said. “Irresponsible allegations were tracked down, and the truth came out.”

The Democratic minority on the committee eventually released a report sharply disagreeing with the Republican majority's conclusion that, among other allegations, the People's Republic of China had illicitly influenced the 1996 presidential election. The report pointedly opened by citing several articles critical of the Republican then-chairman Dan Burton.

Barnett also noted Lu's investigations into other high-profile subjects, including one into the Enron bankruptcy and another into alleged misrepresentations by the Bush administration regarding Iraq War intelligence. He also investigated substandard nursing home conditions.

Lu left the committee in 2004 to work as a special adviser to John Kerry's presidential campaign, where he coordinated the support of 9/11 victims' families and helped to communicate Kerry's positions on homeland security, especially with regard to tracking down the perpetrators of 9/11.

“Having the support of families that had lost loved ones during 9/11 was an important part of validating Senator Kerry's position,” Lu said.

He then joined then-Senator Barack Obama's office upon Obama's election in 2005.

As Obama's legislative director, Lu oversaw a staff of 15 people, the drafting of all legislation and, according to Barnett, Obama's schedule.

Lu said his proudest accomplishments while working in Obama's Senate office were helping to pass ethics reform and weapons of mass destruction nonproliferation legislation, as well as the Federal Funding and Accounting Transparency Act of 2006, which requires disclosure of all organizations receiving federal government money.

“Works exceptionally well with people. Collegial. Perceptive. Has outstanding judgments,” Barnett said of Lu.

When Obama ran for President in 2007 and 2008, Lu primarily remained to help coordinate the legislative activity of Obama's Senate staff, but he also advised the campaign's policy team and ran the communications effort for the Delaware primary (in a parallel to his senior thesis work). He also began to coordinate the Obama White House transition as early as May 2008, months before Obama knew he would become President.

At the White House, Lu served as Assistant to the President and White House Cabinet Secretary, in which he served as the link between Obama and federal departments and agencies.

“He was in a position where he knew everything that was going on in the White House, and he knew what was going on in the Cabinet agencies,” Bob Durkee '69, Vice President and Secretary of the University,

said. Durkee met regularly with Lu when Lu was a 'Prince' reporter covering the University administration, according to Lu, and the two kept in touch while Lu was in the White House, Durkee said.

Durkee explained that the University has a Trustee Committee on Public Affairs, which holds a set of meetings in Washington, D.C., every year. Lu and fellow University alumni Lisa Brown '82, White House staff secretary, and Peter Orszag '91, director of the Office of Management and Budget, met with the trustees for about an hour, Durkee said.

"Chris made the arrangements, and it was very helpful," Durkee noted. "And along the way, if there was an issue where we were having trouble figuring out, 'Who should we be talking to? How can we be sure that this concern gets put on the agenda as people are thinking about a particular issue?', Chris would be a person who was helpful in doing that."

Lu also served as Co-Chair of the White House Initiative on Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders. In this role, he encouraged federal agencies to disaggregate their data on Asian-Americans which, when taken as a whole, can mask problems within certain parts of the community. He also traveled frequently around the country talking with and speaking to Asian-American and Pacific Islander groups.

"There is a perception that Asian-Americans are a model minority and that they don't have economic problems and educational problems, healthcare problems," Lu said. "Even within the Asian-American community, a lot of people don't know about ... the problems of recent immigrants, the problem of hate crimes, about education disparities, or the fact that there are 2 million Asian-Americans without healthcare. It's a very, very segmented community."

Don Lu noted that Lu always seemed passionate about Asian-American issues and studies. The two co-hosted a talk in June 2013 sponsored by the Asian American Alumni Association of Princeton about challenges and opportunities for the Asian-American community.

"It is inexcusable that Princeton does not have an Asian-American studies program," Lu said at the time. "This is a battle that we fought 25 years ago, and I suspect that it's a battle fought well before that."

In February 2013, Lu took time off from his life in Washington, D.C., to serve as a fellow at the University of Chicago's Institute of Politics and at Georgetown's McCourt School of Public Policy as a senior fellow at the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress, where he gave speeches, consulted and wrote.

"This is a chance to see what I want to do with the rest of my life," Lu told the 'Prince' after a few months off.

In January, Lu was nominated by Obama to be Deputy Secretary of the Department of Labor and was confirmed on April 1. As Deputy Secretary, Lu is the department's chief operating officer, he said.

He also enjoys running, has completed 28 marathons and often comes up with his best ideas while running, he added.

"The most thankless role": As an alumnus

Bill Bowman '88 got to know Lu as a hallmate and later as a fellow Class of 1988 Alumni Council officer. Bowman, as vice president, primarily fundraised for the class.

"Some would say [my job's] the most thankless role. I would say that Chris's role as class secretary is pretty much up there," Bowman said. "He had to write the class notes for every issue of the [Princeton Alumni Weekly], and he never missed one."

Bowman also praised the breadth and depth of these reports, saying that while other class's secretaries often focused on their immediate circle of friends, Lu frequently did significant research to report the most interesting occurrences. Lu would also arrange for alumni and their families to see the White House tours while he worked there, Bowman added.

Moreover, Lu served as secretary beyond what was originally supposed to be a five-year commitment and only quit when he left his Senate position to work at the White House, Bowman noted.

"They'd say 'Who wants to be class secretary?' and Chris would say 'Oh, I'll do it again,'" Bowman said. "So I think he made it a point to get to know people and was so easygoing and affable that it was easy for him."

Bowdre, Lu's friend from the Wilson School, also served as the class Alumni Council president alongside Lu.

"Lots of things are easy when you're on campus, but once you leave campus, it becomes challenging to collect information," Bowdre said, adding that she never had to ask Lu twice to obtain the information the council needed.

Lu's service to the Class of 1988 was notable for what he continued even after beginning to work for the White House, Olsen said.

Lu helped to organize the Class of 1988 Memorial Scholarship in 1990, originally founded because of the death of a classmate in a car accident, and "even though he's not class secretary, he continues to manage the fund and the contributions," Olsen noted.

In addition to his work as an alumni class officer, Lu also maintained involvement with the 'Prince' after his graduation by serving as a member of the Board of Trustees.

"You were right, he was amazing": As public speaker

Chris Lu has spoken to other University audiences in the past. In addition to headlining the panel on Asian-American issues at Reunions last year, Olsen explained that she recruited Lu to give the keynote address at the Princeton Club of Chicago's biggest annual event. At first, some of her friends who didn't know Lu didn't understand why she was so insistent on having him speak.

"I think many people were expecting him to speak and just toe the party line and be very evasive or defensive with anything going on in the White House, but I think he was very candid," Olsen said. "Many people who did not know him but knew that I had been pushing him to be keynote speaker, said ... 'you were right, he was amazing.'"

Olsen added that she didn't believe Lu to be a stereotypical politician even though he worked in politics.

Durkee said that Lu had already shown interest in making his message relevant to the Class of 2014 by asking Durkee how he could get in contact with current seniors and talk about the issues that were important to them.

"I think that's part of what makes him an excellent choice for this role that I think he's very excited about," Durkee said.

Martin said that as well as informative, Lu's speech is likely to be entertaining.

In September 2013, Lu gave an orientation address to the Pace Center for Civic Engagement, in which he told students, “You have to give back.”

The topic of Lu’s Baccalaureate speech on June 1 will be public service and civic engagement, Lu said. He will be the University’s first Asian-American Baccalaureate speaker.