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—Ramiro Garcia Jr., Deputy Director,
TCEQ Office of Compliance and Enforcement

NOT JUST AN INTERNSHIP

Mickey Leland Program Marks 25 Years Since Inception at Texas Water Commission

A Mickey Leland internship is not just a chance to gain valuable experience; it is a genuine career opportunity.

“This is a job interview,” says Ramiro Garcia Jr., the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality’s deputy director for the Office of Compliance and Enforcement, the agency’s largest.

Garcia, who was a Mickey Leland intern in 1993, says the manager at the TCEQ who hired him in 1994 worked with him when he was an intern. Garcia, then a recent graduate of St. Edward’s University, says his new boss told him that he was eager to hire him because Garcia did not shy away from small jobs and because he showed genuine interest in his coworkers after he left the internship by continuing to stay in touch.

At the recent annual conference for the Mickey Leland Environmental Internship program—which marks 25 years since its inception at one of the TCEQ’s predecessor agencies, the Texas Water Commission, in 1991—Garcia told the current batch of

interns to be eager and willing to do what is asked of them.

“This internship opened up my eyes to this world,” he says. “It introduced me to a professional world. I learned how business works.”

While the Mickey Leland Environmental Internship program is hosted by the TCEQ, some of the interns actually spend their summer in the program at other state agencies, such as the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the Texas Water Development Board, or even private companies, such as Oncor.



A Human Resource

For the summer of 2016, 115 interns participated in the program, including 96 placed at the TCEQ and 19 with external sponsors. With more than 550 applicants, the competitive program supplies the TCEQ and



Summer 2016 Mickey Leland interns attend the program’s annual conference, “Celebrating 25 Years of Impact and Influence,” at the University of Texas’ Pickle Research Center on July 14.

Summer Interns 2016



550+ Applicants 115 Interns

its partners with some of the best talent from universities across the country.

“We use interns all the time to fill our resource needs,” says L’Oreal Stepney, the TCEQ’s deputy director for the Office of Water and a member of the advisory board for the Mickey Leland program.

“We use it as a kind of job interview,” she says, echoing Garcia’s sentiment.

She says her area usually has about 15 interns each year.

“They are here to soak up all the knowledge we have,” Stepney says, but she notes that TCEQ employees often learn from the interns. “It is a two-way street.”

For instance, many interns are more technologically savvy than their older mentors and share their expertise.

In the movies, interns are often pseudo-servants doing tasks that have nothing to do with the work employees are performing around them. While there is no guarantee that TCEQ mentors won’t assign their interns some menial tasks, they understand that the interns are there to learn.

“We try to give them real work to do,” Stepney says.

Named after Late Congressman

The namesake for the internship program, U.S. Rep. Mickey Leland, never knew about its existence. Leland died in a plane crash in Ethiopia in 1989, two years before the internship program started.

“Congressman Leland’s focus was the environment and helping people who were

hungry,” Stepney says. “He was the one who brought the famine [in Ethiopia in the 1980s] to the world stage.”

The internship program was the brain-child of John Hall, who served on the board of the Texas Water Commission, which later merged with the Texas Air Control Board in 1993 to form the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission, which then became the TCEQ in 2002.

Hall, who served as the first chairman of the TNRCC, says he was a long admirer of Leland’s career and really wanted to find a way to honor him after he died, adding that an internship program was especially appropriate because Leland was such a believer in public service.

“Mickey was engaged in public service for the right reasons,” Hall said. “He loved people. He was committed to transforming the lives of ordinary people.”

Hall says he is grateful to the current TCEQ commissioners and their employees for continuing the program.

Since its first class of 35 during the summer of 1992, the program has had 1,977 interns so far.

Juanita Baldwin, the program’s coordinator, says the TCEQ often turns to its interns when trying to fill regular vacancies. She notes that the agency currently has 45 former interns on its payroll.

A Valuable Lesson

Another former intern is Jaime Garza, regional director for the TCEQ’s Harlingen

and Laredo offices. He was an intern in 1999 while he attended St. Edward’s University.

Like Garcia, he attributes his internship to helping him learn how to be a professional. He says that anytime he starts to feel complacent in his job, he thinks back to an experience he had while an intern. At that time, he was given the simple task of modifying a form compliance

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letter to be mailed out to a regulated entity. He says he rushed through the job, thinking it was simple. When his boss returned the letter, it came back “bleeding.” After that, whenever he was given another compliance letter to write, he did not make the same mistakes.

Even simple tasks, such as modifying form letters, are important to the work the TCEQ does, Garza says. Attention to the small details of how things are worded is critical not only to the reputation of the agency but also because of its regulatory nature, which loses effectiveness when its communications are clouded in ambiguity.

New Possibilities

Lufkin native Xavaier Oliphant has been an intern in the Toxicology Division since



Photo courtesy of the Mickey Leland Archives, Texas Southern University
Leland leads a House delegation to Ethiopia on a tour of famine-stricken areas in 1984.

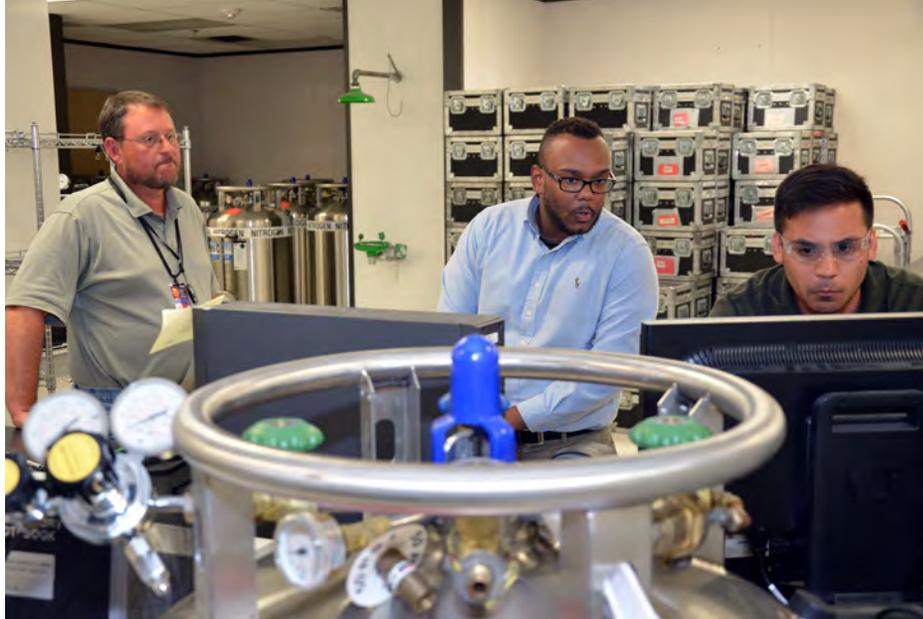
June 1. The Texas A&M University student, who is working on a master's degree in public health, says he has learned so much in his short time with the agency.

"I love the program," he says.

His mentors, toxicologists Angela Curry and Darrell McCant, are pleased with what Oliphant has been able to accomplish during his internship. They say Oliphant's tasks include evaluating data that comes from the agency's air lab, which receives samples from ambient air monitoring stations that are situated all across the state. He also helps with updating the remediation toxicity-factor database and is trying his hand at some water-related toxicology issues.

"We [chose] him partly because of his eagerness," Curry says. "One of the objectives of the internship program is to expose interns to environmental careers they did not know about."

In addition to the work experience, Oliphant is getting credit for a practicum in his master's program during his time with the TCEQ. He says his experience at



TCEQ Toxicology intern Xavaier Oliphant (middle) looks over the shoulder of Air Laboratory chemist Daniel Lesser while senior chemist Craig Mitschke looks on. Mitschke gave Oliphant, who works with air-monitoring data, a tour of the lab, where they process the summa canisters, which are used to collect air samples, either from ambient-air-monitoring stations or collected in the field by environmental investigators.

the agency has been so positive that it has him now considering pursuit of a Ph.D. in toxicology.

"When I was an undergraduate, I wanted to be a doctor," Oliphant says, but an internship with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention convinced him that public health was more in line

with what he wanted to do. "Doing [the Mickey Leland] program has made me think about toxicology."

If asked by another student about the internship program, he says he would say, "Sometimes, you have to step out of your comfort zone. You never know what could happen." 🐾



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