

Cultivating Compassion: Pathways Magazine, Winter 2008-09

Voices of Obama Volunteers I Met Along the Campaign Trail: *Reflections from the Field/Celebrating Change/Moving Forward Together*

by Cam MacQueen

As I looked into the sea of faces – nearly 100,000 – at Obama’s final, election eve rally in Manassas, VA, I was struck by the enormous multi-ethnic movement his candidacy had created. While waiting five hours for Obama’s arrival (our group wanted to be extra early to ensure a good spot), I had ample time to reflect on the significance of the moment for me personally.

Growing up in the South in the 60’s, in a town that experienced riots, National Guard occupation and curfews, I thought of the unrest, discrimination and injustice that had occurred and that as a child, I hadn’t understood. I contemplated how so many brave souls had lost their lives working for equality, justice and the right to vote and whose ancestors were enslaved to build this country. I considered the lasting societal scars of Reconstruction and Jim Crow. I thought of my ancestors and said a prayer of forgiveness. I remembered the dear people I had known who had experienced such oppression in their lifetimes and were no longer with us to participate in this amazing shift of hearts and minds. I thought of Obama’s beloved grandmother who had departed earlier in the day and how I wished she could’ve lived one more day. I reminisced about how far we have come in my lifetime. Tears of happiness and gratitude streamed down my face knowing how close



Cam MacQueen holds a “Women for Obama” sign at the Manassas rally. Beside her is an Australian woman whose daughter volunteered in Virginia for Obama.

*Photo by Benson Blake Photography.
www.bensonblake.com*

Americans were to generating a rebirth of our nation – a united nation – and how grateful I was to be a witness. The night was electric, charged with energy and hope for Obama and the expectation of change for a more unified tomorrow. It was perfection and victory was near.

Now, having returned from spending the final five days of the campaign in Loudoun County, a swing county in Virginia, I am finally beginning to let it all sink in. I am overjoyed that Americans have elected Barack Obama as

our 44th President! Hopefully, *finally*, the centuries-old wounds of slavery, institutional racism, intolerance, international imperialism and hegemony can heal. We must continue the work – for it is far from finished – but we are on our way. At last, change is here.

It is a privilege to share with the Pathways’ community a sprinkling of memories from dedicated volunteers & staffers – many now friends – I met along the way. You’ll see the beautiful photos taken by Benson Blake, a professional photographer, whom I unexpectedly stood beside at the Manassas rally. You’ll read about volunteers who traveled to Virginia to register voters, knocked on doors, ran phone banks, made calls, entered voter data, reached out to various ethnic communities, donated food, water and coffee to hungry, tired, thirsty volunteers, housed and organized volunteers, helped voters get to the polls and generously contributed in myriad other ways to the Campaign for Change.

I realize that many of *you* also heeded the call for change and renewal by working tirelessly to help Obama. I met legions of you - enthusiastic volunteers from Maryland, DC and Virginia who came to the Sterling office to canvass and be an important part of history. Together we did it, with every attempted or completed phone call, every door knocked, every contact made and every critical vote cast. We turned a traditionally red state

blue and we helped to usher in an authentic, thoughtful, brilliant statesman.

As we move forward into this new dawn of historical imperative, kinship, and heightened consciousness, may we keep in mind Obama's directive to stay, "Fired up and ready to go!" He will need us in the near future to serve and sacrifice, again, as he becomes the People's President in a few short months. Let us commit to keeping this phenomenal, restorative O-momentum going! YES WE CAN!

Cam MacQueen, MSW, is the creator and manager of Cultivating Compassion. She can be reached at worldisvegan@aol.com

Community Organizer in Chief

by Tram Nguyen

I've been fascinated by what I can observe of the much-vaunted Obama campaign organizing model. From what I can see, the "disciplined, volunteer-driven, bottom-up-AND-top-down" style is very much in effect here in Falls Church.

There are only three paid staff in the office, but a large team of volunteer field and deputy field organizers, all of them in their twenties, who sit in the back rooms churning out lists, cutting turfs and assembling canvass packets all day and almost all night. In the front room, we phone bankers sit around a big conference table and in barber chairs along the sides (this office used to be a beauty parlor). The people who come in to phone bank and walk precincts are a varied lot -- more retirees during the day, younger people



President-elect Obama has a moment with his Virginia supporters before heading to Chicago to vote in the historic November 4th, 2008 election.

Photo by Benson Blake Photography. www.bensonblake.com

in the evening, a lot of white folks but also blacks, Chinese, South Asians and a few Latinas and African women, and even a handful of international volunteers. There are two guys from the UK who came just for the campaign, and also individuals from Thailand, Belgium and Turkey. Apparently, there was a mini-debate over whether it would help or hurt to have British canvassers, and the decision was made in favor of more bodies on the ground.

Everyone seems to take great ownership of their jobs. Pam, the food volunteer, is a grim, crew-cut lady who somehow gets massive donated meals laid out every day like clockwork (Krispy Kremes, BBQ, fried rice, pilaf and casseroles of all kinds), and is the most important person here as far as I'm concerned. Sang, a young Korean American math whiz, crunches the daily numbers that Kyle and

the other lead staff use to make decisions about where to deploy. A retired attorney named Ed, who's been campaigning in swing states all year, huddles with staffers more than half his age, making contingency plans about dealing with the press and "potential Republican spies" on Election Day.

Besides me, there are two other Vietnamese volunteers -- both older ladies, one of whom took vacation time to come out from San Francisco. We get a huge stack of Vietnamese call lists to wade through, which can be rough going much of the time. I never know what I'm getting on these calls, and have to be prepared with any number of responses, as opposed to the general lists that are now mostly for GOTV of supportive or leaning voters. Sometimes I'm enviously overhearing the other phone bankers, especially this one super-caller guy who always seems to sway his

targets and can argue every Obama policy backwards and forwards, and get discouraged at my many hang-ups, brush-offs and embarrassing gaffes in Vietnamese. The other day, I tried to say that McCain was "past his prime," and instead it came out that he has "left this life."

But, the good moments still outweigh the bad. I had a 40-year-old Viet man who's been calling the office persistently to get help with checking his registration status. He has never voted before and was so urgent about voting now. Another man, in his 80s, asked me respectfully what I thought about Obama vs. McCain and listened at length to what I said, then told me he's now leaning toward voting for Obama. Paul Nagasaki, an API activist here, told me that we only need 20 percent of the Vietnamese community in Virginia to swing. Ho Tran, one of the other Viet ladies, thinks it's as much as 65 percent that are supporting Obama. I certainly feel a sense of accomplishment and urgency around the numbers, but even more compelling are the glimpses of past and present coming together -- captured in the old Vietnamese POW I visited twice, who had deep cynicism about this country but is now going to vote for Obama.

It makes me believe that a shift may be underfoot in the community. People have been changed by this election, just as I have been changed, too.

Tram Nguyen lives in Oakland, CA and works as a journalist.

Hope Had a Plan

by Alicia Aleman

My first experience volunteering for a political campaign began nine months ago on the streets of Baltimore, MD. I didn't know what to expect...but I was eager to get involved. The elections of 2000 and 2004 were a constant motivator. Win or lose, I was going to do something. And I had never been so close to battleground states.

It probably helped that I believed in my candidate and wanted him to be our president. As a lifelong Democrat, Senator Obama's positions on the issues certainly reflected my beliefs. But more than that, he reminded me that our government is "by the people, for the people." Disillusionment was replaced with hope. And hope had a plan.

My involvement in the Obama campaign took me through York, Pennsylvania, during the primaries and ended inside an Obama Campaign field office in Sterling, Virginia, during the general election. Many weekends were spent knocking on doors and talking to undecided

voters. I took time off from work to volunteer full-time during the last week of the election. I knocked on more doors, made phone calls, stuffed envelopes, organized paperwork and helped coordinate the activities of other volunteers.

And now, a week later...a mix of emotions. Amongst all of the joy and optimism I feel about electing Barack Obama to be our 44th President, there is also a sense of loss. I often think of the people I met in Pennsylvania and Virginia - people who shared their hopes and fears with a stranger. I miss working alongside the other volunteers, too. Genuine connections that I'll hold close as I move my life forward.

I often thought about what the day after the election would look like. Would things turn out the way I had hoped? And now that I'm on the other side, I think about what our government will look like under an Obama administration. I'm certain Obama will be a great President. But what I'm most curious about is... will the Obama administration put us to work like the Obama campaign did? I hope so.

Alicia Aleman lives in Relay, MD, and is a science writer.

Notes on a Maryland Obama Field Organizer's Campaign Experience

by David A. Sloan

My experience working as one of two Obama For America (OFA), Maryland Field Organizers was extremely gratifying. Being a native Marylander I've come to love this state I call home. However, it was not until this past election cycle that I

truly had my mind exposed to just how unique and beautiful this state really is and how dynamic and special Marylanders really are.

By September there were 13 OFA operations running state wide: 4 out of "Official OFA Offices" in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Montgomery and Prince George's Counties; and

9 out of “Grassroots Offices” in Anne Arundel, Howard, Cecil, Kent, Talbot, Queen Anne’s and Wicomico Counties, along with a few offices in Southern and Western Maryland. All operations had diligently implemented and ran our OFA Maryland field plan in their respective regions, producing phenomenal rates of Maryland volunteer participation in campaign activities. During the last weekend of the campaign through Election Day:

- **3600 volunteers traveled to Pennsylvania and Virginia** in their cars and passenger vans to get out and support voters in these crucial battleground states.

- **Over 600,000 phone calls were made into battleground states.** This number reflects the most phone calls made from a non-contested state in the country except for California. On Tuesday afternoon Maryland’s phone bank operation called Virginia and Pennsylvania most of the day then deftly shifted gears to help Frank Kratovil in the 1st Congressional race.

- **And on Election Day, there was an 85% democrat turnout** in the state of Maryland - an astounding number that will serve us well in 2010 and into the next decade.

More incredible than the stats above are the individuals I had the privilege to meet and work with across the state at official and grassroots offices. Personally, I found it exceedingly heartwarming to observe so many regional campaign teams dedicated to both our cause of electing Senator Obama and their commitment to their fel-

low campaigners. Marylanders are a people who realize that the greatest asset they have is one another. Our offices were run by our folks from all walks of life-- by professionals & homemakers, teachers & students, campaign pros & beginners, our sons & daughters, and our brothers and sisters. We were all working together in harmony for the cause of moving our state and nation forward. They all believed we could—and they did.

We should all be immeasurably humbled and proud, I will forever be.

David Sloan, Obama For America, Maryland Field Organizer is 26-year-old native Marylander raised in Prince George’s County. Past campaign experiences include serving as Prince George’s County Regional Field Director For Governor (then Mayor) Martin O’Malley in 2006 and Co-Field Director for Stephanie Rawlings-Blake’s Campaign for Baltimore City Council President in 2007.

Barack Obama Can Lead Us There

by Stephen Premo

I had almost arrived at the Upper West Side’s 157th street subway station in Manhattan when my cell phone rang. It was my father on the line, suggesting that I should volunteer for the Obama campaign for the final homestretch instead of waiting tables. My coffers were nearly depleted after a fruitless two-month search for a job offering professional growth. After getting off the phone, I turned around and packed my things.

Then, I jumped on the next bus to Virginia.

My motivations, however, were not entirely personal. Volunteering for the Obama campaign was as much action against Republican policy and governance as it was for Barack Obama and his platform. Like many Americans I simply decided that I couldn’t stand idly by through another election cycle. My volunteering effort, though modest and short-lived, was an unforgettable experience.

I began by making phone calls and canvassing the households of voters who voted Democratic as well as those still on the fence. However, the needs of our field office quickly outstripped our capital. I started training phone bankers and setting up calling stations in the office. I was assigned the position of phone bank captain, providing some relief to our hub directors. Our office had the enviable position of having more volunteers than we had phones. Many folks were gracious enough to use their coveted cell phone minutes to get out the vote for Barack Obama. We nonetheless managed to meet our voter contact goals each night.

Ten-hour days turned into 19-hour days. Strangely enough, I greeted each morning with renewed vigor. When working for a cause in which I truly believed with other like-minded and motivated individuals, I found the ability to summon reserves of stamina and drive I didn’t think I had. Each day I was continually impressed with the dedication of volunteers who returned day after day to knock on doors, talk to people, enter data, and organize materials and manpower for the next day. I was struck by the humility, grace, compassion

and fortitude with which my colleagues worked.

I volunteered for Barack Obama because I believed that he held the strongest grasp of our nation's issues. He possessed the temperament, judgment, and ambition to restore faith in the United States at home and abroad. I believe we can bend the arc of history again toward justice; I believe Barack Obama can lead us there.

Stephen Premo graduated with a major in Political Science from the University of Mary Washington in May 2008. He volunteered for Barack Obama's Campaign for Change office in Sterling, Virginia. Originally from Ashburn, VA, he currently resides in New York City and is looking to pursue public interest and law as a career.

Outreaching to Spanish-Speaking Voters

Patricia G.

This presidential election was the first time since immigrating to the US twenty-three years ago that I had a tremendous need and desire to volunteer for a political party, in this case Barack Obama's campaign. And I stress Obama because I consider myself an independent voter. Obama represents my values, and he stands for a much-needed change for the U.S. After watching how the current, corrupt administration has been destroying our country, I felt that if I did not get busy doing my part in bringing political change, I would not be able to live with myself if Obama were not selected on Nov 4th.

Living under Bush's adminis-

tration has reminded me of the dictatorship I left behind many years ago in Argentina; the only difference is that Bush legalized his abuse by using every single opportunity "under the law." Volunteering for the Obama campaign was my opportunity to support the Democratic Party by calling Spanish-speaking voters; I also donated whatever money I could even though my husband is unemployed as are thousands of others. What this suffering has taught me is not to take for granted my civil rights or become complacent again, and that my responsibility as an American citizen goes beyond voting.

Patricia G. is a nurse who lives in Prince George's County.

Deserve Victory!

Travis Grilli

I cannot believe it. I try to believe it. The well-dressed people on the television seem to be in consensus about it. The internet too. I'm still not sure. A large part of the high is feeling a part of it in a way that I've never felt before. It's a special kind of pride, and very powerful. I imagine that this is the feeling that drew entire legions of volunteers across Loudoun, across Virginia, and across the nation to not only support Barack, but to make phone calls, knock on doors, donate homemade food, enter that wonderful data, drive lunch orders out to staging locations (that one I especially appreciated).

I read an estimate on fivethirtyeight.com suggesting that we, the team that has elected the first black president, consist of

a volunteer army of somewhere around a million people. It amazes me that I can represent such a small slice of that movement- yet feel so empowered by my brief part in it. Across the country, about a million people just like me- however different from me they may look at first-made sacrifices, surrendered countless dollars and hours, as well as precious shoe-leather, toward this goal. Find me one who does not think every moment was worth it.

One of my former campaign bosses used to hang a poster in his office. It was a British WWII era recruitment poster. The picture was of Winston Churchill pointing outward at the reader. The simple caption is a favorite quote of mine: "DESERVE VICTORY!"

On Tuesday, we did.

Travis Grilli is originally from Stony Brook, NY. He graduated from Mary Washington in 2007. After working in Long Island politics for a year or so, he now lives, and votes, in Fredericksburg.

Working on the Campaign for Change

Abby Kannappan

I had the opportunity to work on Barack Obama's campaign in Sterling, Virginia. Although I live in Maryland, I decided to take on the challenge of turning the traditionally Republican Loudoun County blue.

I have always enjoyed working on campaigns. It makes me grounded and more aligned as to who I am. Understanding people and the issues that drive

them can help you realize that you can make a difference in the lives of others. Everyone that I met on the campaign was driven by inspiration and embodied this same energy. A huge number of volunteers poured through the office during the last weekend. Individuals that had not known each other before came together as a team, worked hard and made personal sacrifices to bring in Loudoun County for Obama. We actually had more volunteers than work, it was unbelievable. One volunteer, Kane, told me he, “was willing to do anything to help Obama.”

Those are the type of people that you admire; they can fit into any role to get the job done. Chris Jones, assigned to drive people to polls on Election Day, is an example of this. He encountered an immigrant family with three people registered to vote in separate counties. He did his best to help them, and even tried to find out from elections officials if the 75-year-old grandfather was eligible to vote on a provisional ballot.

The campaign was designed to “instill excellence in the community” and promote a cooperative spirit and sense of belonging. The plans were simple, easy to understand and well executed. Imagine how well the county would run if this energy could be extended to everyone.

Abby Kannappan is a Project Manager with Charity Network Inc, in Rockville, MD. She is the child of Indian immigrants and was born and raised in Houston, Texas.

America, Yes We Did!

Patricia H. Lee, Esq.

Overjoyed, optimistic and free to exhale – those were my feelings Tuesday night.

Believing started for me in October of 2006 after exchanging emails with my friend and fellow Northwestern University alum, who also was a fellow University of Chicago Law School colleague. She was one of the first persons who spoke to me about Barack Obama as President of the United States of America. That October, twenty five months ago, I too became enrolled in the possibility that Barack Obama could be the President of this country and the idea that we as Americans can create positive change. On a grassroots level, entrepreneurs, veterans, homeowners and ordinary people, united powerfully to vote for real change in Washington.

On November 4, 2008, we all witnessed a very historic moment and I must say that it has been an honor to meet so many wonderful, community-minded people throughout the country. I personally travelled throughout seven (7) states and the District (South Carolina, Delaware, Illinois, Ohio, Colorado, Virginia, Maryland and Washington, DC) and phone banked into Pennsylvania for election protection (North Carolina, Vermont and Texas, too).

There were so many amazing experiences for me, such as talking to and blogging with people, senior and young, beginning with the South Carolina and Delaware primaries; being moved in the Denver stadium

along with 85,000 other Obama supporters eager to hear Barack Obama’s vision; experiencing the many phenomenal speeches and entertainment; working with dedicated volunteers and donors, including my husband and friends in Montgomery County, who thoughtfully listened to the latest news from Advisors; and driving throughout the Hampton area of Southeast Virginia with enthusiastic canvassers and appreciating their dedication and revelations.

On Election Day, I was able to return back to one of my age old traditions of serving at a polling place near my home in Maryland. This tradition dated back to 1982 on the South Side of Chicago when Harold Washington was elected Mayor of the city of Chicago and for me, this time in 2008, it felt like a charm.

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Thoughts on the Election

MD State Senator Paul Pinsky

Cathartic is not a term I would usually use when talking about elections. In fact, politics and catharsis aren’t usually spoken in the same breath. But this Election Day was different. People described voting as a life-changing experience: some revealed voting for the first time in twenty-years while others broke down in tears after touching a screen next to the name Barack Obama. Although clearly evi-

dent among African-American voters that Tuesday, it was also true among many white voters, particularly the young.

There was a pride in the people standing in lines before polls opened and leaving the polls that showed looks of satisfaction that went beyond, "I voted; I did my duty." It was a feeling of "I'm proud to be able to vote today. This day. For this candidate." Even with the polls showing a likely victory, in fact, a quiet skepticism still lingered as to his actual election, even with the polling projections. Many voters, far sure of victory, were proud just to be able to have the opportunity to cast a vote for Obama.

Watching the results later election night and knowing that when key states came in Obama would prevail still didn't allow many people to exhale. It was only when Obama was declared the next president that people jumped, cheered, wept and hugged. The lingering doubts were swept away in a type of deep euphoria, rarely seen. It was truly a satisfying night.

Paul Pinsky has served as a progressive voice in the Maryland General Assembly (District 22) for 22 years. You can visit

him at <http://senatorpinsky.org/site> or at paul.pinsky@senate.state.md.us.

The impressions of the Obama volunteers & staffers infer a final message for our President-elect. We wish you a smooth transition to Pennsylvania Avenue and continued wisdom, courage and fortitude during this turbulent time of war, economic upheaval and global meltdown. Know that we are with you; call on us, expect us, teach us and trust us. We know that you are the one we have longed for and we are ready to be by your side.

Mr. President-elect, as you go forward, remember the words of Alice Walker, spiritual teacher, animal advocate and Pulitzer prize-winning writer who counsels you to "cultivate happiness" and tend to your soul, "Because, finally, it is the soul that must be preserved, if one is to remain a credible leader. All else might be lost; but when the soul dies, the connection to earth, to peoples, to animals, to rivers, to mountain ranges, purple and majestic, also dies."

She reminds you that "Your smile, with which we watch you do gracious battle with unjust characterizations, distortions and lies, is that expression of

healthy self-worth, spirit and soul, that, kept happy and free and relaxed, can find an answering smile in all of us, lighting our way, and brightening the world."

To cultivate happiness as you face the challenges ahead, please consider adopting a homeless dog as "First Pooch" from the Washington Humane Society on Georgia Avenue or DC Animal Control on New York Avenue. This decision would convey a wonderful message giving millions of homeless animals in shelters throughout the country the attention they deserve and would bring you and your family a world of satisfaction and happiness.

Thank you for this magic moment, may it grow and last. May it be what future generations come fondly to refer to as the period of "Great Change the World Was Waiting For!" Peace be with you always.

"An Open Letter to Barack Obama" can be found at <http://www.theroot.com/id/48726>

See more of Benson Blake's photography at www.bensonblake.com. Contact him at 757.846.3393)