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Pounding the Pavement in Primary Season: It's Obama Time!

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Article

“We need a revolution for the people - for the poor, for [those] who have nothing! The politicians and the rich, they’ve already got it all! What do they need?” -- Stonewall veteran, Sylvia Rivera at the 2001 NTAC Board meeting in Washington DC

It seems just like old times. Admittedly I’ve been jaded after a decade plus of political activism, with nothing to show for it other than broken nails, broken dreams, broken promises and a broken spirit. Yet just like the old war-horse that everyone presumes is out to pasture, as soon as I hear the battle bell and become inspired, I’m back in the game just as before. This inspiration came from the same source that appears to be inspiring the country, the likes of which haven’t been seen since JFK.

This inspiration is Barack Obama.

So it was that I’ve been wearing out one of my two good pair of Nikes hitting my precinct to get folks to the post-election caucus, and on a Saturday night spending in the heart of Houston’s gayborhood bar district, pushing folks to vote and then go back to the post-primary caucus to elect delegates. Frankly it’s been two very different tales from my suburban precinct here in wild, wild West Houston, and the tony, elite progressive environs of the Montrose.

From my home precinct, one I chaired until 2005 (when economics demanded I start focusing on my own housekeeping before I lost the house I was keeping) it’s been pretty inspiring a response so far. This was a raw meat-red precinct when I took chair in 1999, and it would be another four years before this transitional spot began the domino flipping of red-to-blue in my area. When I turned the chair over to my successor, I never presumed we would have a situation where Texas would ever matter in a presidential primary selection. We never had before.

Lo and behold, Texas matters for the first time in my lifetime in primaries. In fact, as it’s looking now, Texas may well be the knockout punch for Obama over Hillary Clinton. From what I’m seeing in my precinct and the undecideds I’m bringing over (especially among African American voters and men of all categories in my ethnically diverse neighborhood) things are looking very promising for caucusing on Tuesday.

However, I’d be remiss to use my precinct as a bellwether. I block walked heavily during the Kerry 2004 campaign, and even helped a neighboring precinct chair do likewise for her first elections. Kerry carried my precinct with 57% of the vote, 54% in the precinct I helped and 53% on the precinct on the

opposite side of me. The initial ebullience over now having three blue precincts in our sea of red was dashed when I got home to see the numbers in the rest of the city and the nation. Kerry didn't carry everywhere else.

So on Saturday afternoon at a Montrose café after one of my board meetings, I happened to meet a young college student at the counter who asked if I'd go pass out flyers in the bar district on a Saturday night with her and others. Shades of the Parker Campaign in 1997, and the Gore Campaign in 2000 - I found myself outside the bars with the same old verve.

"Hope will never be silent." -- late San Francisco City Councilmember, Harvey Milk

I even saw a couple of other old familiar faces, notably Randall Ellis, former executive director for the Lesbian Gay Rights Lobby (LGRL), an activist I truly respect despite LGRL's previous history before his tenure. He's a man after my own heart, not someone who simply talks and directs others while he preens for the camera. Like me, he's out the pounding pavement, leading by example.

There were lots of other Obamamaniacs as well, with a surprising contingent that made the trip down from the Seattle area. One of them was a very cool transwoman from Bellingham, WA named Rebecca who appeared about my age. There were also a gaggle of younger Obama supporters who were there on assignment from the media from the Seattle paper (and working on contract out of the Chronicle). They watched us work the crowd and took notes; including the same ugly earful we drew from a few of the Clinton supporters who sought to evoke a reaction.

That ugliness surprised me a bit. I understand their candidate is losing and that they have tight loyalties, but Obama supports the gay and lesbian community virtually as much as Hillary Clinton, only without the long-term relationship. Why this would draw the Hussein comments (uttered with intent derision) or worse the "Obama bin Laden" from the flitty little gayboi (with his jaunty equal sign/HRC ball cap) and clinging to his boyfriend's arm. The worst was the drunken old vato suavequito who took great pleasure in getting in my face, then Rebecca from Washington's while referring to Obama rather loudly as the antichrist.

Something like this was what I'd expect from Rove-led Republican Red-Meatheads. It was astonishing coming from progressive liberals.

However, it wasn't all bad news in the heart of the Montrose. A notable portion of the passers-by was supporting Obama. Unlike my home precinct, it was probably the opposite - about 55-45, maybe 60% for Clinton at best. However, I did note that all gay African Americans were for Obama, as well as what few trans people I encountered there.

One thing I didn't expect: being tabbed as the impromptu "election expert" on the street. It was amazing to watch folks (even if they weren't those directly asking the question) begin flocking over to listen to how the delegate process works. I'd had that individually in homes in my precinct, but seeing folks come over and begin asking multiple questions and learning the process was heartening, even if surprising. There may not have ever been much reward for all those years working the precincts and maneuvering the delegate process, but suddenly it became useful knowledge.

It seems improbable until you understand that by the time primaries ever made it to Texas, the

presumptive nominee already had the election sewn up. That was a recipe for apathy and no need to learn the rather complicated processes. Now, with both sides' supporters needing to learn on the fly, I'm almost like a rock star to the suddenly curious.

All of this comes courtesy of Barack Obama's campaign. Four years ago at the Boston DNC convention, I thought he was a phenomenal speaker. But I must admit that I didn't think he had a chance at securing the nomination in 2008. Here's a kid of mixed-race, from a teenage mom in a single-parent household, from Hawaii who even had his period of "youthful indiscretion" as George W. Bush would phrase it, and now this man has grown and is proving the impossible may be possible after all.

For a transgender person like myself who got a lifetime of naysayers telling me "it's impossible," it catalyzes your inspiration. If there was ever a time we needed this, it's now.

Obviously all the work I do will not even get the scarcest of notice outside of my own precinct, yet another year of my life spent with no personal return. But for once, someone from this same improbable background, someone who's an outsider like most me (and most all trans folk) is getting a chance to fulfill the dream. My dream won't be realized, but at least I can work to fulfill someone else's dream rather than work for someone who's already got it and for whom it's just another trophy in an overfull trophy case.

I'm sore, I've worn out one pair of my Nikes, and I've lost a bunch of sleep. But I'm back in the game again. Who knows ... maybe I can dream someday?

"You gotta give 'em hope...." -- late San Francisco City Councilmember, Harvey Milk

"These dreams, they won't let me close my eyes.

Every moment I'm awake, I live another life." -- Dreams, Heart

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