

WHAT I SAW WHEN I WOKE UP

On Thursday, October 25, I was sitting at my desk, doing Caliban business on my computer, when the phone rang. A young man said "Can you hold for a conference call with the President?" I said that I would hold, but thought "Come on now, if you're going to play a recorded message, just say so. I can accept that." For ten or fifteen minutes, with a lot of bustle and rattling, the young man kept assuring me (and I'd guess hundreds or thousands of other volunteers on the line) that Barack Obama would be on the phone momentarily. I kept doing my work. Then the man himself picked up the phone. And it was live! He was in the middle of a 48 hour no-sleep campaign blitz, flying all over the country. It sounded like he was on Air Force One. He said he was grateful for the work we were doing and wished he could hug each one of us, but now was the time to "leave it all on the field." What a guy!

From June 2012 through election day I worked for the Obama campaign. Most of that time I was doing phone banks, persuasion calls to Nevada and Colorado. Calling people who had been harassed by mudslinging ads from superpacs and, yes, many calls from Obama volunteers, is no picnic. You can get a whole range of unpleasantness, from exasperation and rudeness to vile, racist invective. On the other hand, you also get people who just want to discuss the issues and are open to dialogue. You even get people who thank you for doing the calls, because they know it isn't easy.



Since the media told us that there was an "enthusiasm gap" for Obama in 2012, I was surprised at how passionate most of his supporters were, even with a cold-calling stranger interrupting their lives. It's true that most of us were terrified that a Romney presidency would nullify every progressive gain since Teddy Roosevelt, but there was also a genuine devotion to the man who had actually tried to fulfill all his 2008 campaign promises, and had succeeded in fulfilling most of them.

I had also heard that the Republicans had come up with a way to outdo Obama's legendary get-out-the-vote system. After a week-end training session with a regional director from the campaign, I was reassured by learning how agile and organized the system was. That was just before the first debate. Lucky for me, because I had a little bit of optimism to hang on to as I watched Obama's graph lines in Nate Silver's 538 blog diving at a 45 degree angle day after day after day. Every time I checked (and that was too often) I shouted silently to myself, "Pull up, pull up!"

In October, we did many long phone sessions that were intended to get everyone ready for the big push.

And each session drew more and more people. Rep. Loretta Sanchez had generously offered one side of her office in Anaheim (as large as a union hall) for the Obama phone banks. I was asked to help co-ordinate and to train people who had not done this kind of thing before. As I talked to people and listened to them calling, I was moved. What they said to the people on the other end of the calls was clearly coming from the heart. Then I started to notice other things about our callers as a group. I have never seen a more ethnically diverse bunch of people in my life. (And Orange County, California, is not particularly known for its diversity.) There were African-Americans, Latinos, Asian-Americans, Polynesian-Americans and immigrants from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Europe, as well as progressive whites from teens to people in their nineties. When I heard a woman with a very strong Asian accent calling, being rebuffed because people could not or did not choose to understand her, I was moved to tears. She kept making call after struggling call, determined to do something to help get the President re-elected. When I asked if she would prefer to help in some other way, she said no, that she was ok and continued to call through the rest of the session. I have not seen that kind of courage in many people. I know I don't have it.

On the Sunday before election day, I had been training people for hours, saying basically the same thing over and over. I emphasized what our trainer had taught us: stay

positive, talk about Obama's accomplishments not Romney, and remember, calls do not work unless you connect with the person on the other end. Exhortations just don't get results. Don't rush: the longer you converse, the more likely it is that person will go out and vote. Sitting at the front desk, exhausted, I looked up and saw a man in his late sixties (like me!). I asked, "Have you done this before?" He said, "Oh yeah, I've done it before. I worked for Gene McCarthy." I thought, my God, he was a part of the Children's Crusade, and now, forty-four years later, this Rip Van Winkle woke up with an urge to help re-elect Barack Obama. That Sunday our group made over 12,000 calls. The entire California organization made over a million.

Election day was one of the most exhausting experiences of my life. Even the trainers and coordinators were calling all day long, whenever they could. All hands on deck. As we got to the last hour before the polls

closed in each state, marching West through the time zones, we were making as many last minute calls as we could. Virginia, Ohio, Wisconsin, Colorado, Nevada. After going full speed until the deadline, a coordinator would shout, "Stop! Hold up your call sheets!" People would collect them and distribute new ones for a new state. This crazy, desperate intensity went on for several hours, until the hundred or so people were ready to drop. They had hit the wall. Some people were crying. I was toast. Then I remembered Obama's last campaign speech, with his story about the lady from a small South Carolina town. I shouted "Fired up!" The whole crew lifted themselves up and shouted "Ready to go!" We did that call and response for about a minute and the adrenaline was ripping around the room like we had just started. I went through a lot of insane things during the sixties in Berkeley, some joyous and some miserable, but I have

never felt a stronger bond with the people I had joined in common cause than at that moment. And Obama carried every state we called.

The day after the election my wife and I flew to Hawaii for a long-promised visit with our daughter. I really needed the rest and vegetated for the first couple of days. During that wonderful period of oxtail saimin and lau laus, sushi, malasadas and shave ice, it came to me. Obama and his campaign people had created the thing so many of us had dreamed about for so many years. Without any fanfare, he had created the true Rainbow Coalition! And it produced results! The period after the election has shown that the angry opposition has learned nothing from the shellacking they took. But that really doesn't matter to me. A new coalition has been formed. I was part of it and I will continue to be.



John Digby