

7-2018

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Recommended Citation

Moore, Lynn M., "Walking with Purpose: Campaign Canvassing Stories" (2018). *Education Faculty Publications*. 20.
https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/education_pubs/20

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Lynn M. Moore

Walking with Purpose: Campaign Canvassing Stories

I remember the thrill of voting for Hubert Humphrey in my first presidential election. Nearly fifty years ago on Tuesday, November 5, 1968, I stood in line ready to vote, ready to participate in what historians, including Arthur Schlesinger and Jon Meacham, call America's grand experiment. I was swept up in the knowledge that I had a voice. To this day, I revere the right to vote, yet I know more is required of all citizens. The words of Alexis de Tocqueville underscored the sense of purpose I experienced; in the 1830's, he wrote, "The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens." Because his words still ring true, I was motivated to make calls, to knock on doors, and to listen to people because I understood Tocqueville's observation.

Whenever I volunteer, I know I'm fulfilling Tocqueville's conviction, especially when I registered potential voters. During the 2014 election cycle, I drove my Subaru down a dirt road through pine forests and aspens and red oaks interspersed with open fields. Chokecherry trees brimmed with purple clusters, yellow sunflowers and blue wild asters grew near a mailbox. A man in his fifties sat on his front porch smoking a cigarette and drinking coffee. His yellow lab bounded toward my car, stopped—gave me a quizzical look, then turned and settled beside his friend.

"Hello, I'm Lynn with the Democratic Party. Is Mary Nelson available?" The man explained she was at work. Protocol required me to mark "Not Home" and travel to the next address. This time, I didn't follow protocol. Marvin was a quiet man who told me he worked nights and was just taking in the midday sun. I asked if he had time to answer questions about the election and proposed amendments. He told me he wasn't a registered voter. When I showed him the voter preregistration form, he agreed to complete it.

"I need to get my glasses and I'll be right back," Marvin said. He stepped back in the house and I sat down by his yellow lab. It took only a few minutes for Marvin to complete the required information, and I promised to send it to Minnesota Secretary of State. We shook hands and I think his yellow lab smiled too.

A few weeks later, I campaigned in a neighborhood close to where I lived as a child. The listed person lived in a small house on a quiet street. I followed a well-worn path to the back door. A woman in her mid-twenties answered my knock. Behind Louise, I saw an ironing board, two huge baskets of laundry, folded towels on the kitchen table, and shirts on hangers. I asked if Rebecca Olson was home.

“No, she doesn’t live here anymore,” Louise said.

“Do you plan to vote this November?” Adding quickly, “Have you had a chance to register?”

“I’m not registered,” Louise said, “but I would like to vote.”

Through the torn screen I handed her a clipboard, a pen and the form.

“No one ever asked me before,” Louise said.

“Well, I’m glad I asked.” I gave her two thumbs up. “Yeah!” We both laughed.

Both exchanges made for good days. Two potential voters now have a voice and can participate in our democracy.

Amy Klobuchar’s 2006 campaign for the senate was my first extended foray knocking on doors in a central Minnesota community. She won and became the first woman elected as a U.S. senator from Minnesota. Voters respected her tenure as county attorney for Hennepin County and her reputation as a tough prosecutor. I continued to work phone banks and knock on doors from 2006 to 2016, meeting friendly voters who wanted to talk, who wanted to tell me their hopes and concerns. Despite disparate political views, everyone wants to be heard.

A College of St. Benedict colleague once told me that in order to really hear a person, we should listen reverently with the ear of our heart. Over the course of several election cycles, I practiced the Benedictine values of respectful and receptive listening. To me that meant, I should face the speaker, maintain eye contact, smile, nod and ask related questions. Along the campaign trail, I gathered stories in Minnesota and in southwest Florida. And in both states, I saw differences but also many similarities.

Barking dogs protecting their homes was a constant. No matter the community, I met friendly, generous and caring people. They thanked me or called out to “stay safe.” I began to think of canvassing as walking with purpose.

On a September-warm Sunday in Minnesota, I canvassed for down-ballot candidates a few miles north of town. While crossing a bridge over the Mississippi River, I smiled at teenagers hauling colorful inner tubes to the water’s edge. Just past the bridge was the last house on my canvassing list: a log rambler set back on a grassy yard framed by pines and gold-leaf birches. To the left of the dirt driveway were large metal outbuildings, an old pickup and a flatbed truck. Grabbing my clipboard, campaign literature and voter registration forms, I patted my pocket for a pen and hoped no ferocious dogs would bound toward me. I glanced quickly at the information sheet noting the names Walter and Willy, two bachelor brothers—or so I thought. Walter, dressed in a blue striped work shirt with a Randy’s Auto Works emblem over the breast pocket, opened the screen door and invited me in for a beer. I declined, but the offer was one I won’t forget. Instead we sat on his front porch. We chatted about the weather and Twins baseball, but not much about current politics, except that he was a personal friend of a state representative and his wife. As I turned to leave, I noticed a sheet cake cooling on the kitchen table. If you have ever attended a baptism, confirmation, wedding or funeral and served lunch in a church basement, sheet cakes were served. I learned that Willy was his wife’s nickname. His friendliness and good-natured hospitality illustrated the cultural characteristics of Minnesota Nice. I headed back over the bridge to the town known as First City on the Mississippi River.

Our democracy depends on informed voters. While Walter and I talked on his front porch, he didn’t need to be persuaded to vote or told where his polling station was or encouraged to support environmental issues or to endorse a particular candidate. Did my canvassing make a difference with Walter, or with any voter? I believe that connecting with voters does make a difference. One memorable example was my conversation with Elsie Christensen. On the second ring, 96-year-old Elsie answered. “Oh, Dearie, I’m too old to vote. I don’t know who is telling the truth.” I understood Elsie’s feelings of being overwhelmed. When I remarked how strong her voice sounded

she replied, “I have a new hip now and I get along so much better.” She added that her niece will drive her to the polls on Election Day. One afternoon, I assured a mother that her two little girls could indeed enter the polling booth while she voted. She was visibly relieved. Whenever informed citizens vote, they reaffirm the sacrifice, the wisdom and the courage of the framers of the constitution.

Although Walter is the only voter who offered me a beer, one summer day a woman gave me shallots pulled fresh from her garden. Another friendly gardener shared Pinterest tips and whispered that she voted in the evenings because she takes her husband. “Otherwise, he wouldn’t vote,” she said. People may be worried or wary of me, and sometimes even angry, but they all wanted to be heard. I was reminded how sitting on a local citizen’s front porch and truly listening to that person mattered. More and more, I knew that I liked meeting voters. I liked their stories. When Elsie told me about her successful hip replacement, I was able to rejoice with her good news.

In school, I learned that glaciers once covered Minnesota. Over time the glaciers slowly retreated, leaving a landscape of rolling hills and plains and boulders rimming thousands of fresh water lakes. Much like the evolving landscape, the landscape of politics has also changed over time, but not always slowly.

In 2012, a presidential election year, two proposed constitutional amendments altered the political landscape. The Minnesota Marriage Amendment (Minnesota Amendment 1) stipulated that only a union between one man and one woman could be recognized as a marriage. The proposed Voter Identification Amendment (Amendment 2), or as I called it, the Voter Repression Amendment, required all voters to present a valid photo identification in order to vote. While canvassing for this election and these two amendments, I drove down a side road searching for a house number. Shortly, I pulled to a stop at a small, rather dilapidated house. Through the open screen door, I saw an older man watching the evening news. Robert stepped outside wearing work trousers and a white T-shirt. He didn’t seem in a hurry or annoyed by answering my standard questions. Yes, he was voting at the polls and, yes, he knew where his polling station was located. He took the campaign literature and then turned the conversation to his own life. Robert spoke proudly about his late grandfather, a man of influence in town, who worked

on the railroad, and built the home where Robert now lived. And did I know his mother who years ago worked as a waitress at Sam's Supper Club? No, but the mention of Sam's Supper Club reminded me of my own stories of dining at Sam's in the early 1960s. Robert thanked me for canvassing, and then he expressed concern for President Obama.

Back in the car I finished checking off the boxes, reminding myself that people were involved and concerned about local and national issues. Robert was troubled that placing restrictions on Minnesota voters would erode participation. Jim Ragsdale's article "Voter fraud: Stuffing ballot boxes or the stuff of myths," summarized opposing views requiring photo identification before voting (October 29, 2012 *Star Tribune*). During a phone bank shift, a woman whose elderly mother didn't have a driver's license relayed a concern. "I'm able to help my mother obtain a government photo ID," the daughter said, "but what happens to elderly citizens without resources? I'm worried they may lose their right." The Voter Identification debate raged throughout the fall.

"Go around back," is not a command by Mr. Carson from *Downton Abbey*, but a practice I soon learned. Often when I knocked on front doors, it was obvious by the rain-soaked and wrinkled campaign literature stuffed in the screen that residents rarely used the front door. The backyard was where life happened. Consequently, I got in the habit of walking around back. That same fall that I talked with Robert, I spoke with a middle-aged man. His backyard was filled with summer blooms and a tidy garden bursting with vegetables. James stood in the open door, nodding when I asked if he had a few minutes. I commented on his bountiful garden and flowers. He smiled. I asked if he supported the proposed amendment to ban same-sex marriages. He was uncomfortable and not willing to talk, so, I shared why I cared. "Sir, my nephew is in a long-term relationship with another man. My fervent wish is that he can live safely and not fear discrimination or even physical harm." James hesitated and then told me about a relative who was gay, and he admitted that he wrestled with the issue of same-sex marriage. That November, Minnesotans defeated the amendment requiring all voters to present valid photo IDs, and the amendment banning same-sex marriage.

Before beginning a canvassing shift, all volunteers check into local campaign field offices, usually rented spaces in vacant storefronts. No matter the year or

community, the offices share similarities. In 2012, a former drugstore was transformed into a makeshift headquarters filled with long tables for volunteers and desks for the field organizers. Campaign posters covered the walls and the wide expanse of windows. Lawn signs leaned against walls and stacks of campaign literature covered a side table. Toward the back, volunteers and staff found bottled water and doughnuts, cookies and chips. As election night loomed closer and the race intensified, field organizers spent long days and nights, while kind-hearted residents brought in homemade stews and soups simmering in slow cookers.

During a presidential election year, more resources become available including computers that enable staff and volunteers to enter calls using Voter Activation Network (VAN) an efficient and easy-to-use system. Ubiquitous, stripped-down cell phones were also available. The protocol for volunteers was to let the phone ring four times, do not let the call go to voice mail, and do not leave a message. Always ask for the person listed, and if the person is not available, politely thank them and mark “Not Available.” That summer and fall, I logged many hours tapping in voter numbers using either a cell phone or VAN. Senator Amy Klobuchar was running for reelection in 2012 and having served six years, she was well known and, frankly, she was loved. No matter the scripted opening line, my greeting began: “Hello, I’m Lynn, calling on behalf of Amy Klobuchar and the Democratic Farmer Labor Party.” “I love Amy,” was the frequent response, and I knew I had my foot in the door, so to speak.

In 2014, a down-ballot year, voters like Walter and Robert advocated for broadband access, a necessity for rural parts of the state to have fast internet service, and they debated the merits and the feasibility of increasing the minimum wage. At the same time that these issues were discussed, news of the deadly Ebola outbreak affecting West Africans grew louder and louder in the press and on local and national television.

A man answered on the third ring and in response to my question as to whether he planned on voting early or at the polls, he shouted, “I’m not voting!” It wasn’t unusual to hear that someone wasn’t voting. I didn’t voice my opinion that people have died for our right to vote—although tempted. But something in his voice spoke not only of anger but anguish. With all sincerity, I asked why he wasn’t voting. “I’m not voting because this

so-called commander in chief is sending my son to that godforsaken place to fight Ebola.” I understood his fears. My son was informed that his Red Bull Brigade was being deployed to fight the Ebola virus. In my mind I could see this father sitting at his kitchen table and reading the news of the highly infectious virus while listening to his television as President Obama spoke of deploying 3,000 military personnel to West Africa.

“I’ll pray for your son’s safe return,” I promised.

“Thank you.” The anger faded from his voice, but not the pent-up worry. I could actually sense his shoulders sag and his fists unclench. Because U.S. military men and women constructed hospitals, supplied sources of clean water, and provided education, the spread of Ebola was stopped. In the end, neither sons were sent to Africa.

In the remaining days of the 2016 presidential election, I walked up and down the streets of a southwest Florida Gulf Coast community handing out Protect Our Progress cards; a list of Democratic Party endorsed candidates; cards listing early voting sites; red, white, and blue notices to place on front doors; and “Vote for Hillary” stickers.

In my door-to-door voter outreach, I met Maria and Joseph who voted for the first time as U.S. citizens. They lived in a cream-colored stucco home common throughout southwest Florida. Despite similar exteriors, their well-maintained home stood apart from many on the same block. Flowering red hibiscus shrubs and landscape lights lined the walkway. Together, they met me at the door. Joseph explained that he and Maria had opted for early voting, and he pulled out his wallet to show me his driver’s license, though I think he knew I didn’t question his word. I stifled my impulse to hug them, but instead shook their hands. As I tuned to leave, he called, “God bless you.” I met people eager to become citizens like Andrew, who was lifting weights in the driveway. “In about five years I can vote,” he said, telling me about his hopes for the future. As I walked down the drive, he told me to stay safe. It wasn’t unusual for me to hear words like “thank you” and “God bless you” and even “stay safe.” This particular community was poor in assets but rich in spirit.

Upscale-gated communities are common throughout Florida, but this community was not one of them. The neighborhoods of single-family stucco homes and duplexes seemed isolated from a nearby larger city. Concentrated poverty existed (Herriges). Few streets were through streets; most streets ended at canals. Twenty miles away, the Caloosahatchee River streams westerly past the historic River District and the Edison & Ford Winter Estates before flowing into the Gulf of Mexico. Native live oaks, slash pines, and palmetto palms grow in the coastal lowlands, and in vacant lots yellow coreopsis and white biden nod among the brown grasses. Along the bike paths bordering scrubby flatland, cyclists bike miles without shifting gears.

On Friday, November 4, 2016, I traveled the highway east to the field office of the Florida Democratic Party to begin my canvassing shift. The young field organizer, wearing a fashionable long skirt, blue blouse and sandals met me in the courtyard of the former realtor's office. Despite cramped quarters, she ran an efficient field office (It seems all field organizers are young, smart, and earnest). Volunteers hustled about completing specific roles. A worker assembled packets of the voting script, voters' names and addresses, and campaign brochures that were secured together with thick rubber bands. Two helpers entered data into computers and answered phones. Another volunteer offered me bottled water and a candy bar to take on the road. People swirled in and out while a seasoned assistant instructed two women on canvassing tips including how to utilize GPS on their cell phones by starting with the first address to find a designated neighborhood.

Following their tip, I entered the first address in my GPS system, parked alongside the road, and walked up one side of a street and down the other, checking my lists for the identified resident. A primary goal in the last week was to ensure people voted. Red, white, and blue flyers announced "Election Day. Tuesday, November 8, 2016 and Polls are open 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m." along with the voter assistance hotline.

Although I saw ample evidence of children's toys scattered near doorsteps, and children watched me tentatively from behind their mothers or grandmothers, I rarely saw young children playing outside. Later that afternoon when school let out, I watched groups of elementary-age students walking the dusty streets accompanied by an older

woman or teenager. Except on major streets that led to the library and the public schools, there were no sidewalks or even safe shoulders to walk or bike. It was a transient neighborhood and new residents now occupied homes on my list. Since 2010, household incomes have plummeted. Consequently, the number of owner-occupied homes had declined, while the number of rented properties had increased. Data U.S.A. reported that 21.8 percent of the population lived below the poverty level. The largest demographic living in poverty is female, in the 35 to 44 age range (Herriges). Despite not finding the listed person, I talked with whomever came to the door. Most often, women peered from between their blinds or glanced around the sides of their curtains or called out behind closed doors, “Who’s there?” “Hi, I’m Lynn with the Florida Democratic Party,” and doors opened. One woman told me “Supposed to happen. Got to protect President Obama.”

Further down the street, I skirted a big-wheel tricycle and a cat’s empty food tin, and water bowl. A grey tabby slept on the sunny doorsteps. That Friday afternoon, I met three generations: mother, daughter and granddaughter. Jolene cheerfully accepted the campaign literature and called her daughter to the door. “Someday my grandbaby will hear the story how her mama and I voted for the first woman president,” she said with her infant grandchild cradled in her arms. I thanked her for voting early and setting a good example for her granddaughter.

On Saturday, November 5, three teenage boys played soccer in the streets but moved aside as I drove past. Down the block, I noticed a middle-age man, wearing a plaid short-sleeve shirt and jeans, washing and waxing his car. He was friendly, talkative and spontaneous. I learned a lot about his job and his family. He took advantage of early voting and later would drive his nephew to the polls. His spontaneity reminded me of conversations I shared with Minnesota voters where people talked openly about their life, families and concerns. While we talked in the driveway, a grandmother, wearing a grey cardigan sweater buttoned up over a pleated skirt, stepped outside and peeked at me from behind the car. She smiled. I asked her if she wanted a Hillary sticker and she nodded yes, placing the Hillary sticker over her heart. Neither one spoke the other’s language, yet we shared a friendly moment.

I have heard all the arguments against canvassing; how going door to door distributing campaign literature and making telephone calls accomplished nothing. When grocery shopping, I often see people I met on my canvassing walks, but we're preoccupied with checking our lists, filling our carts, and finding the shortest line, not really taking time to know one another. I found that meeting people at their front door or driveway hearing for myself their hopes and fears was an advantage, one that helped me know and understand their life stories. Throughout my canvassing walks, I continued to practice the Benedictine values of listening respectfully and receptively. Thus, I learned of obstacles or hardships preventing citizens from fully exercising their rights. I learned that their car broke down or they were working two jobs, or they worried about child care. And I learned that some individuals cannot vote because they are convicted felons. Florida is one of three states that permanently disenfranchises citizens with past felony convictions (Brennan Center for Justice).

Permanent disenfranchisement hinders individuals convicted of a felony long after they complete their sentences. Their families also suffer. On Monday, November 7, a woman carrying her baby boy came to the door. The baby had big brown eyes "like his daddy's, but he has my dimples." We both laughed when he grasped a leaflet. Rebecca thanked me for volunteering. "I can vote," she explained, "but my husband can't as he's an ex-felon." Rebecca told me about her husband's efforts to restore his rights and encouraged me to check the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition website.

Others, too, told me similar stories. The doorbell was rusted, so I knocked. As I stood on the doorstep, a yellow dog meandered from around the corner of the duplex. From behind the door, a woman called out, "Who's there?" Once I identified myself, she opened the door. In front of me stood a tall woman wearing a black and white geometric print caftan. Standing even taller, her chin up, Patricia was forthright when she said, "I cannot vote. I'm still trying to restore my civic rights." Shortly after meeting Patricia and Rebecca, I met a man in his mid-forties who quietly told me that he could not vote because he was an ex-felon. Their stories stayed with me. Later, I checked the website of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition and learned that 1.5 million Floridians with criminal records are disenfranchised.

Until 2010, I never gave a thought to whether an ex-felon could vote or should ever be allowed to vote. That summer, however, I met a woman whose questions left me wondering about the two sides of this debate. In one older Minnesota neighborhood of small two-bedroom houses with unattached garages accessible from the alley, I found the front door sealed, so I walked around to the back door. Lilac bushes framed a neglected, sunken garden. A rose bush poked through the weeds. The woman who came to the back door wore a long thick robe and her dark hair streaked with grey fell to her shoulders. A pit bull puppy swarmed around the woman's ankles, and a feral cat watched me from a ledge. In the background, I heard an updated weather report. I was reluctant to accept her invitation to enter until she assured me I was safe. We talked about the upcoming election, about her home, about domesticating feral cats, and then she pressed, "Why can't felons vote?" I didn't have an answer.

But her question prompted me to learn why. As far back as ancient Greece, citizens who broke a law could not appear in court nor enter into contracts and were prohibited from voting. English colonists brought the notion of a "Civic death" to America (Brennan Center for Justice). Advocates for giving ex-felons a second chance believe that restoring their rights helped reintegrate them into society. The young mother who met me at the door carrying her baby son felt strongly that for the sake of their family, restoration of voting rights opened doors to a better life.

There is hope for some citizens with criminal convictions. Currently, in Minnesota, voting rights are restored to individuals upon completion of his or her sentence (Brennan Center for Justice). In the upcoming 2018 mid-term election, Floridians have an opportunity to vote on an amendment that restores voting rights to citizens with felony convictions. If the constitutional amendment passes, Floridians will be eligible to register to vote once the full term of their sentences are completed. The amendment does not include convicted murderers or sexual offenses (Brennan Center for Justice).

The mood on Tuesday, November 8, seemed to shift from optimism to weariness. A garbage truck rolled slowly down the street hoisting recycling bins. A twenty-something woman with purple streaks in her brown hair called to me from across the

street, “You don’t have to knock on their door. We all voted, the whole block.” I left the red, white, and blue flyers, reminding voters that polls are open from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. on the door, and crossed the street. Jamie and a sullen looking man sat outside their garage watching her son play with his water pistol. She surprised me when she commented, “People think Hillary will take away their guns, but she won’t. She just wants them away from dangerous people.” I was surprised because in my four days of canvassing, this was the first comment I heard related to common-sense gun policies.

The long campaign left people weary and wary. A teenager growled that his father was voting for Trump. I asked if he was old enough to vote. “No,” but a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. Nonetheless, he shut the door firmly and I heard the deadbolt click. The 2016 presidential campaign was just hours from being over and people were tired.

I, too, was exhausted, but not defeated. On Wednesday, November 9, 2016, I resolved to return to the same southwest Florida community where I met citizens pinning their hopes on electing the first woman president of the United States of America. I did return. Every Tuesday as a Head Start volunteer, I listened to four and five-year-old children recite the alphabet, count to ten, recognize words and write their names—even their last names. On the last day of the program, I sat among mothers, fathers, aunts and uncles, siblings and grandparents, watching children sing songs they had mastered. It was a joyous day. My commitment to voter outreach had been restored.

Mid-term election campaigns for 2018 have begun. Once again, I will walk with purpose because I recall Tocqueville’s belief that a democratic society is measured by the quality of functions performed by citizens. I remember Joseph and Maria who cast their first ballot as U.S. citizens, and I remember Andrew who looked toward a day when he could vote. I think about Elsie who told me about her new hip and how it was easier to get to the polls. I heard their stories.

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