

## Greetings from the 'Nati - finding voters for Barach

**A three-part report from Nico Berry** (*husband, father and son, skateboarder and graphic artist in San Francisco, who just happened to also design the Gordon Berry campaign literature for South Bend*) who spent 3 days campaigning in Cincinnati for Barach Obama.

His website is: <http://nicoberry.com/>

I had planned to set up a blog to document efforts to help make an ass out of Ohio (a jackass, that is.) But on the day before I left the Obama campaign called and told me not to blog or post online anything about my experience volunteering. So, instead of posting anything where prying elephantine eyeballs could glean secrets, I'm going to send out a bunch of mass e-mails to my trustworthy friends and relations.

Today I canvassed in one of Cincinnati's poorest neighborhoods and it was a somewhat surreal experience. The stark racial and economic contrast of the neighborhoods in Cincinnati makes Chicago look well-integrated. I was paired up with a young, just-outta-college go-getter from outside Austin, TX who has been working for the campaign for 8 months or so. He had been in Detroit for almost the whole time and just came to the 'Nati about a week ago. He didn't come off as particularly street smart and sometimes seemed a little condescending, but he certainly seemed to have no problem walking into a dimly-lit dilapidated Public Housing unit and stepping over people sleeping in the middle of the floor to hand a flyer to the half-prone woman in curlers whose name was on our list.

The first building that we entered could have easily been a set for "The Wire" (the HBO television series that follows cops and drug-dealers in Baltimore's toughest neighborhoods.) We knocked on six doors in the building. Three or four people opened their doors and all were very responsive; one of the women had even already voted. The seventh unit that was on our list was inaccessible because the staircase leading up to the top floor was covered in six or seven layers of molding, rejected carpet scraps and the landing was blocked by what looked like an abandoned hobo camp from pictures of The (first) Great Depression; including a stove made from a 2-liter bottle of 7-Up, a candle, and a BBQ grill.

Other memorable highlights from the day include; the young security guard putting down his copy of The Iliad to look at our IDs and double-check that our names weren't on his 3-page "undesirables" list, the day-old human feces basking on the front steps of one of the semi-abandoned buildings we fruitlessly inquired at, and the semi-toothless man who told us that he and his mother had already voted for Obama yesterday but he would've voted for Bush if could. "I like that Bush, he's alright, y'know," he earnestly opined as we tried to mask our confusion.

Attached at the bottom of this e-mail is the "Obama" piece I did yesterday at an annual hip-hop festival that a friend of mine throws in Cincinnati. The campaign also had a booth set up at the event and one of the other volunteers told me he was going to post a picture of it on the Ohio Obama site. I had a lot of people coming by and posing next to it and talking politics while I was painting.

One of the women who was working the event is an older right-wing Republican and we had a long and spirited discussion that certainly didn't change either of our minds but by the end of the day we were palling around like a couple of terrorists. She even told me it was a pretty painting (though she thought I should really do another one for McCain so it would be fair and balanced. I told her I'd buy her the paint so she could do it herself, but she didn't go for it. I guess she knew it would Palin comparison.)

I also discovered that my friend who organized the event and with whom I'm staying right now(!) is a Republican as well. I've had my suspicions in the past that he had been turned to the dark side (especially after one night a few years ago when he got drunk and his intoxicated ramblings prompted my friend Chen and I to change his name from Fat Nick, his unfortunate, and no longer appropriate, childhood nickname, to Evil Nick.) He claims that he's not going to vote in this election but if he did he would vote for Obama. I'm not sure I believe him though, so I'm encouraging him not to go to the polls. In fact, I feel a little weird staying in a Republican's house and working for the Obama campaign. I think tomorrow or the next day I'll move to a hotel or something.

Thanks again to everybody for supporting this trip, especially Jo, T-More, Mary, Jesse and Mom and Dad!  
**Peace, Nico**

## **Report 2**

Hello again from the 'Nati,

I spent this afternoon in an area that is the polar opposite of where I was on Sunday (and not just because it was freezing today and all I brought was a sweatshirt.) If the extremely poor, almost all-black neighborhood I was in Sunday could have been a set for "The Wire," today's could have been on "MTV Cribs." It was a set of cul-de-sacs called "Montgomery Reserve." I initially thought that this Montgomery was reserved for our enemy's supporters when my canvassing cohort referred to the houses as McMansions. He soon enlightened me though and told me that the phrase referred to the fast-food franchise and the speed with which these houses had most likely been built. Either way; McCain or McDonald's, it's enough to turn your stomach.

These houses were ridiculous. You could probably fit the entire population of Wasilla, AK in just one of their chandeliered vestibules. To be honest, I felt safer in the ghetto; you never know what could be lurking behind those hedge-funded hedges. I was pleasantly surprised though; while there were a number of McCain supporters who curtly communicated their political affiliation, we also encountered a bunch of Obama supporters who seemed especially happy to have us singing the blues in what was obviously a very red neighborhood.

Before heading out canvassing I spent all this morning and all day yesterday at Cincinnati's campaign headquarters. I did everything from sorting informational door-hangers to intercepting 30,000 lawn signs to assembling cell-phones. Most of my time, however, was spent with one of those cell-phones pressed against the side of my head. I called about 250 numbers and encouraged over 100 Ohioans to vote early at the Board of Elections or please get their absentee ballots into the mail before Friday. I felt like a girl in Junior high spending all that time on the phone, but after about 4 straight hours on Monday I was ready for a break. I asked the office manager if there was something else useful I could do and she asked if I wanted to shred. I thought, sweet! I can finally use my skateboarding abilities for a good cause. Unfortunately she was talking about shredding stacks of obsolete phone lists not shredding the raw streets.

Tomorrow will be the first official Get Out The Vote day and I think I'll be out in the cold again so I'm going to turn in and get some sleep. Thanks again to everyone for your support.

**Peace, Nico**

## **Report 3**

This will be the last dispatch from my trip. I got back to San Francisco a couple days ago, but it's been so hectic between work and Halloween that I'm just getting a chance to do this now...

On my last day in the 'Nati, after a good night of sleep in a swank hotel courtesy of Cousin Jo, (thanks again Jickles!) I was canvassing in a working-class neighborhood on the outskirts of the city. As my Dad also discovered in his campaigning (all you South Bend, IN residents don't forget to vote for Gordon Berry for At-Large School Board Member) the most frequent occupants one encounters when going door to door are dogs. I think if a candidate could figure out a way to collar the canine vote no one would be able to pull his lead.

I went out by myself this time but I was pretty confident after canvassing the other two times with a partner. I was aware of how much more comfortable I was in this neighborhood where the residents are so much closer to me in terms of their economic class. In the really poor and really rich neighborhoods I felt more like an interloper coming in to proselytize with my own political views; but there in the working-class neighborhood I felt like I'd be more able to relate on a personal level if people had questions or were still undecided in some way.

I was also aware of my own prejudices towards melanin-challenged people. I was much less reticent to

approach the young black man in a hooded sweatshirt smoking a joint on his front porch than the older white woman, whose lawn was littered with weathered plastic animals and a rusted-out pick-up truck, peering from behind her screen door. I'm sure most of it is just racist stereotyping on my part designed to avoid confrontation; "he is a person of color, so of course he's going to want to vote for the person of color. She is a poor white woman so of course she's ignorant and racist and will want to vote for he old white guy."

Race is certainly the elephant in the room (or donkey in the room as the case may be) in this election and I think it's amazing that both candidates have avoided making it an issue as much as they have (certainly not completely, of course, but c'mon this is AmeriKKKa after all.) Of course, my stereotype that all the whites in these neighborhoods would be racist McCain supporters was shown to be just that; a stereotype. I met a number of (since we're stereotyping) regular Joe Six-packs and Hockey-Moms who were gung-ho for Obama. (Although I didn't actually meet any non-whites who were gung-ho for McCain, but I'm not complaining) But it certainly put me more at ease, especially in the rich neighborhood, to look down at my canvassing list and see that the residents of the chateau, sitting between two McCain-sign sporting McMansions like special sauce between two all-beef patties, would be named Vivek and Mamata, not Chet and Barb.

As I said in the first e-mail, the stark racial and economic contrast of Cincinnati's neighborhoods is certainly striking. It may be just because I was a Democratic volunteer staying in a Republican's house, but the tension that I could feel bubbling just under the surface in the 'Nati reminded me of Johannesburg, South Africa. For Obama hopefully it'll be more like New York, New York though; if he can make it there he can make it anywhere. And right now he's up in the polls so start spreading the news... and don't forget to vote on Tuesday!

Thanks again to everybody who helped me out and is going to help Obama get elected president on Tuesday by voting! (This means all of you.)

**Peace, Nico**