

Catching a wave of young vigor

Chris Satullo, *Inquirer* columnist

What has David Burstein been up to?

Let's see. In the last year or so, he's debuted a film he produced, founded a nonprofit, been quoted in the New York Times, featured in a WashingtonPost.com interview, spoken at college and high-school campuses ranging from Watts to Washington, persuaded 20,000 Americans to register to vote, and turned in his term papers.

Term papers? Oh, did I forget to mention? Burstein just wrapped up his freshman year at Haverford College.

He's 19.

Digital technology has opened a world of opportunities - and a Pandora's box - for young people. Get a notion, grab a camera, post your video on YouTube - no gatekeepers, no censors. If you're dumb and unlucky, the stuff you post might haunt you for a long time. If you're clever and lucky, more people might watch your video than saw all of Shakespeare's plays during his lifetime.

Burstein has caught a wave. But his film isn't about dogs on skateboards or cats on pianos. It's about American politics and America's youth, and why the two seem to have barely a handshake acquaintance.

How he got this movie made is a tale of idealism, persistence and chutzpah. At age 16, Burstein started cold-calling movers and shakers on Capitol Hill and in the media, asking if they'd let some bespectacled kid from Connecticut interview them about why so few young people vote.

"It was important to aim high," Burstein says now. "I didn't want this to be just some 'student' project. I wanted young people who saw the film to say, 'Wow, look who took time to talk about this.'"

Wow, look who took the time (among others): Sens. Robert Byrd, Chris Dodd, Joe Lieberman, Chuck Hagel, Sam Brownback, Barbara Boxer; also Wesley Clark, Sam Donaldson, James Carville and Richard Viguerie.

With 200 hours of interviews on tape, Burstein got some friends in the film business to help him turn the raw footage into a polished, 35-minute film called *18 in '08*. (Oh, did I forget to mention that Burstein had met those folks earlier, when he organized a film festival?)

The film, simple and direct, leaves you eager to vote, right now, even if you have to run through a wall to get to the polls. It's been shown to more than 20,000 people live (and many more online at www.18in08.com) and has inspired a like number of registrations.

Burstein has crisscrossed the nation, while carrying a full load at Haverford, showing the film and hosting discussions about the importance of paying attention, registering and voting. He'll stay on the road this fall, hitting about 50 campuses. (Airports are good for catching up on coursework.) The push will culminate in a big Election Night event; Burstein can't yet confirm the site (but SEPTA might get you there).

Burstein grasps what an amazing ride he's on. ("I was on TV with Brian Lamb interviewing me for an hour!" Yes, he's the kind of wonk for whom the C-Span host is a big name). But he also says he's just one of many young people using digital technology to amplify their voices.

"Young people are being empowered to do the most amazing things," he said. For him, there's another X-factor: "All this has a lot to do with how I was brought up."

Mom and Dad are pretty proud, as you might guess. Dan, a writer and venture capitalist, and Julie, a fine arts photographer, say that from his kindergarten days, their son showed an activist stripe.

"He wanted to know why amoxicillin didn't come in better flavors, like pineapple, so kids would take it," Julie O'Connor says.

Where did he get the confidence to stride into senators' offices seeking interviews? Well, when he was 8, his parents took him to one of those glamorous Renaissance Weekends at Hilton Head, where he got to ask President Clinton a question. Still, his mother said, "It's breathtaking to think he's doing these things."

His father sees his son as one of many in the "Millennial" generation "who want to dig in, to engage, to master the process, to make the system work for them."

Dan Burstein, a child of the '60s, hopes the active idealism of his son's generation does not get crushed. "We've all seen people burn out on political movements; we know how hard to it is to maintain ideals and survive in the political system," he said. "But David is persistent; he's relentless."

Let the relentless one have the last word: "I really believe we're going to see a record turnout among young voters this year."

If so, 19-year-old David Burstein may have done as much to make that happen as anyone this side of Barack Obama.