
18 in '08: How youths can change America

By David King

INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

When David Burstein was 16, he grabbed a video camera and headed to Washington with one goal in mind: to show young people that their votes would be crucial in the 2008 election.

Three and a half years later, he has seen this idea through, getting some of the biggest names in politics to appear in his documentary, *18 in '08*.

"We had requests out to over 400 politicians, activists and analysts," the 19-year-old filmmaker and Haverford College freshman said between bites of cafeteria pizza in the student center. "We had a request out to the president, but it didn't work out."

18 in '08 is both a 35-minute film and a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that encourages young people to vote - in part, by showing the effect they can have on policy, from a Darfur rally to a college-loan rate cut. It features interviews conducted mostly by Burstein with politicians and activists such as Sen. John Kerry, Sen. Joseph Lieberman, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, and Gen. Wesley Clark, as well as voters and nonvoters. (The \$15 DVD is available at www.18in08.com.)

Burstein - who hopes to be a politician someday himself, and readily quotes trends and statistics - is balancing a full course load with making plans to take the film on a 50-state tour this summer and on a university tour this fall.

"This film lends credibility to the once-insane notion that young people actually care about politics," said David King, lecturer in public policy at Harvard University, who was interviewed by Burstein and is on his advisory board. "The conventional wisdom has always been that young people just don't care, but now more than ever, that isn't true."

There are already signs that 2008 is a big year for young voters. Of the eight states that were part of Super Tuesday in 2000 and 2008, seven saw sharp increases in the number of voters under 30 (they tripled in Missouri and Georgia, and increased fivefold in Tennessee), according to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement based at the University of Maryland.

Scott Merrick, 22, a two-term New Hampshire state representative interviewed in *18 in '08*, was elected to his first term when he was 19. Although he was little more than a ballot-filler then, Merrick, now a senior majoring in political science at Tufts University, campaigned heavily for young voters and won by fewer than 150 votes.

"Politicians are looking to reach out to whoever will give them the best chance at winning," he said, "so young people have to give politicians a reason to pay attention."

Burstein came up with the idea for *18 in '08* when he was a high school sophomore. He hosted a party for his friends to watch the 2004 returns.

"Everyone had to go home around 11, but I stayed up watching into the next morning," he said. "I kept thinking, 'This is supposed to be a year we were going to see record numbers of young people voting, so why is such a small segment of youth voters getting involved?'"

Burstein drew on his experience as an organizer of the Westport Youth Film Festival, a Connecticut program run by and for high school filmmakers. He decided that a movie would be the best way to engage his generation, and he got his family and friends to back him financially.

In the 2004 election, 47 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds who were eligible to vote did so, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Although that was the lowest rate of any age group, nearly 11.7 million young voters turned out, 3 million more than in 2000, and the most since the voting age was lowered to 18 in 1972.

Depending on how the statistics are presented, 2004 was an encouraging or discouraging year for young people in politics.

U.S. Rep. Christopher Shays (R., Conn.) said in the film that the 2004 youth turnout was "pathetic" and that lowering the voting age was a mistake. In an interview, Shays said he had since changed his mind.

"I think that young people are starting to take politics more seriously now," he said. "And getting them involved from the beginning will keep them focused over time."

To solicit interviews, Burstein peppered the e-mail in-boxes of press secretaries for politicians, explaining his idea.

"I knew we needed to get a lot of important people involved in this project," Burstein said. "This couldn't be some kid going out for a videography project and talking to the town mayor. I had to make sure I had big names in it, and that it was done in a big way."

He spent 2 1/2 years traveling from his home in Weston, Conn., to Washington on school breaks to film interviews. He also deferred enrolling in college to take a year to work on the project full-time.

Burstein, who plans to double-major in political science and religion, took his digital video

recorder to Crossborders, a New York company that creates short-form Web content.

"David came to us with well over 200 hours of pretty impressive raw footage," said Nick Godfrey, chief operating officer of Crossborders and one of *18 in '08*'s producers. Crossborders shot 50 additional hours of footage, edited Burstein's material, and wrote and produced the film.

Burstein and Crossborders are putting unedited versions of the interviews online on sites like YouTube.

This medium may be an effective one for reaching young viewers, said Merrick.

"Our generation is hooked on watching online video, and David shot some quality stuff," Merrick said. "He didn't give any free passes, and he threw out some of the sticky issues in a nonpartisan way."

Burstein said he was seeking a corporate sponsor to put copies of *18 in '08* into every high school social studies class in America.

"We have an abysmal voter-turnout rate in this country," Burstein said. "So if we can increase that in the earliest age group possible, those people will continue to vote for life, boosting all age groups in the future."

No matter the level of political involvement, Merrick said, the key is to start early.

"It's difficult to run for office, but it's easy to get involved in politics," Merrick said. "Why wait? Get started now. That way, in 20 years, we can tell our children, 'We got involved and look at all the changes we made. Now, it's your turn.'"

Contact staff writer David King at 215-854-4193 or dking@phillynews.com.

© Copyright | Philly Online, LLC. All Rights Reserved. Any copying, redistribution or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the express written consent of Philly Online, LLC is expressly prohibited.