

Vanguard Filmmaker

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By Current

David Burstein, 19

Haverford College

by Jennifer Pelly // Fordham University



David Burstein is a pretty normal guy. We actually have a lot in common—Burstein and I share the same favorite Bob Dylan album (“Blood on the Tracks”) and the same favorite Spice Girl (Posh); we both go to parties on the weekends and have been known to peruse YouTube with friends.

But, unlike me, Burstein is a Gen Y all-star. He has been making regular appearances on Fox News, ABC World News, NPR and in a slew of other impressive media outlets since November for his breakthrough documentary “18-in-08,” which has been screening at schools since June and was released on DVD in November. The film addresses the position of young people in the upcoming presidential election and emphasizes the importance of getting involved in the political process.

It’s a Monday afternoon when we meet up at a Starbucks on 42nd Street and Park Avenue in New York City—just a train ride away from Haverford College in Pennsylvania, where David is a

freshman. Earlier that day, while I was taking midterm exams, Burstein was showing “18-in-08” at two Connecticut high schools. The Sunday prior, while I was cramming for midterms, Burstein was doing an hour-long interview on C-SPAN’s interview show *Q & A*—which, he says, has always been one of his life dreams.

“I’ve always been very interested in politics,” he says. “I joke that when I was 15, this was something that I hoped I would be doing when I’m 30.” But he’s checking the CSPAN appearance off the list of goals a full eleven years early. Another goal he’s achieved at 19: Burstein was recently recruited to write a political commentary for the internet-newspaper *The Huffington Post*.

Burstein came up with the idea for “18-in-08” in 2004, during his sophomore year at Weston High School in Connecticut. Upset after George W. Bush won the 2004 election, Burstein realized he wanted to get directly involved in the next election. He says that one of the biggest flaws in the political process is that it is skewed toward older people. With “18-in-08,” Burstein has sought to bridge the gap between young people and politicians, something that he believes politicians fail to do themselves.

The film started out as something that Burstein and friends worked on as high school sophomores when they had days off from school and were on breaks. Burstein got more serious about the film during his junior year, and ended up taking off a year between college and high school to finish it. During that year, he filmed most of the movie himself, but brought in two professional producers from Crossborders, a video production company.

Throughout the process of creating the film, David has kept a positive attitude toward his generation, attributing recent low levels of political participation not to apathy but to cynicism and frustration with how long it takes for things to change within our political system. “I think young people don’t respond well to the politics of politics,” he says.

Burstein had two objectives for his film: to get his peers involved in the political process and to prove that when young people have ideas that they are truly passionate about, they can bring them to life. Burstein spent two years conducting more than a hundred interviews with congressmen, presidential candidates, policymakers and activists. He traveled from Boston to D.C. to New York to Connecticut, and even to Illinois for Barack Obama’s presidential announcement. Burstein interviewed everyone from Scott Merrick—a recent college graduate serving his second term as representative to the New Hampshire state house—to Senator Robert Byrd, the most senior member of the U.S. Senate, as well as celebrities like actor and activist Richard Dreyfus.

“The interviews I got were done almost entirely through cold calls,” he says. He hopes his peers take a cue from that: “If you have a passionate idea and a project, you can get John Lewis and John Kerry and Sam Brownback and Jeb Bush to be in your movie,” he says.

“18-in-08” is Burstein’s first film, but in high school he founded the Westport Youth Film Festival for high school students, which received 300 entries from students worldwide. Now in its fifth year, it has become the largest film festival for high school students in the world.

Reaching well beyond the realm of college students, “18-in-08” has been shown everywhere

from middle schools to local diners. The project has also grown into a full-fledged organization to spread political awareness, with two tours and a series of celebrity public service announcements in the works. This summer Burstein will be packing up a bus for a 50-state tour to spread the word about “18-in-08.” He’s also doing a university tour in the fall. Burstein may take off from school for the tour in the fall, but as of now he rarely misses classes, and plans to graduate in four years.

Part of the goal of “18-in-08,” Burstein says, is to fight the idea that politics can’t be fun. “It’s not even so much that we have to make politics cool,” he says. But he does think that informal interaction, like asking a friend to watch the debates the same way you would ask them to go to a party or a movie, is key in encouraging young people to get involved in politics.

When I ask David what year he will run for president, he laughs, as he picks at his fruit salad and gazes out the window towards the busy New York streets. “I don’t know about that,” he says, “but I definitely am interested in running for political office someday.” Wherever the crazy path that he’s currently on may take him, something tells me that, in ten years, David D. Burstein won’t be getting his regular coffee in New York—he will be talking to reporters at Starbucks on Capitol Hill.

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