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Call center brings Obama campaign to Old Town

10/16/08

By **Gwendolyn Glenn**
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Staff Photo by **Nicole Martyn**
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Before Wendy Hamilton moved to Laurel in 2002, she lived in Columbus, Ohio, and described herself as a staunch evangelical Christian, who looked to her church in making decisions on who to vote for on Election Day.



Volunteer campaign worker Kay Miller, of West Laurel, makes calls to registered voters using her own cell phone at the Obama presidential campaign call center at a union hall on Ninth and Montgomery.

During those days, Hamilton, a registered Republican and election judge at the polls, voted for conservative Republican candidates, "who my church said stood for the issues we supported."

But after getting a master's degree from Howard University's School of Divinity, Hamilton said she began to think differently and started looking more closely at candidates and what they stood for on a broad range of issues, and not just their party affiliation or stance on religious matters.

And now, since mid-July, the still-registered Republican has been one of nearly 200 people who have used their cell phones on various weekends to make calls for Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama at his campaign's call center at 901 Montgomery St., the building that houses an Asbestos Worker's Union local.

"I felt compelled to get involved in the campaign because, since attending divinity school, my thinking has changed and I'm more inclusive, and Obama's message of inclusiveness resonated with me," said Hamilton, who has worked as a Howard County election judge and will be the chief judge at Laurel Woods Elementary School on Election Day, Nov. 4.

Hamilton helps coordinate the volunteers, who have used their personal cell phones to make more than 15,000 calls to registered voters since the call center opened.

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"We have a diverse group of callers," said Mark Cook, the northern Prince George's County coordinator for Obama's campaign. "We have blacks, whites, seniors and young people, Hispanics, Republicans, Democrats and Independents."

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"I have one 87-year-old white man, who's a retired military Republican, who comes here from Annapolis every week."

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Not all of the volunteers come each week, but when they do come, they are given lists of registered voters to call, mainly in Virginia, a key battleground state in the upcoming presidential election between Obama and Republican presidential candidate Sen. John McCain.

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Cook, who was impressed when he met Obama when the presidential candidate was running for the U.S. Senate in Illinois, travels to Laurel each weekend from College Park. He said he helped to organize the call center in Laurel after talking to friends here who wanted to work on the campaign.

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"I had lots of friends in Laurel who wanted to do something," he said. "So, we started asking people to come and use their free weekend cell minutes to make calls during the (Democratic) primary."

Although the Asbestos Worker's Union Local 24 is not affiliated with the call center, union officials offered space for the center on the second floor of its Ninth and Montgomery streets offices. McCain does not have a campaign office or call center in the city of Laurel, but does have one in nearby Howard County, according to officials at his mid-Atlantic regional office in Arlington, Va.

In addition to having space for the volunteers to make calls at the Laurel center on Saturday and Sunday from 2 to 5 p.m. each week, the call center also has a poster arts corner to keep children busy who come along with their parents.

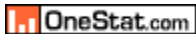
In addition to the campaign calls, volunteers have also registered eligible voters at the center.

On Election Day, Cook said, "We will be at the center all day watching the results."

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