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News > Top Stories

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Forest Hills takes on Hillary holdouts in Scranton

BY LAURIE RICH

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At the corner of Washburn Street and Frances Avenue in West Scranton, PA, in a subdivision lined with neat one and two-story single-family homes stretching up a hill, lies a white, vinyl-sided raised ranch house with a faded blue "Hillary for President" sign in its bay window. Theresa Campbell, 52, a Senator Barack Obama campaign volunteer from New York, took notice of the sign before walking up to the door and knocking. She was warned about this.

Hillary holdouts. It's one of the things Democrats in Queens and Scranton, PA have in common this election cycle, and a major reason that members of the grassroots volunteer group Forest Hills for Obama have driven two-and-a-half hours to northeast Pennsylvania this Saturday.

The group has traveled every Saturday and Sunday since September from Forest Hills to a city that in this campaign has become synonymous with the word hardscrabble. Though they've held events in Queens, for the most part these volunteers have focused primarily on Scranton - taking it on as a sort of sister-city.

And Scranton, right now, is one popular sister. She's nearly this election's homecoming queen. In the last few weeks, Democratic Vice Presidential Candidate Senator Joe Biden and Senator Hillary Clinton, both with Scranton roots, and Republican Vice Presidential Candidate Governor Sarah Palin, all held rallies in the city.

Just last Friday the Obama campaign sent an urgent letter from Pennsylvania Senator Bob Casey to supporters nationwide, entreating them to come and volunteer in this "crucial battleground state" in the final days before the election. So, when Forest Hills for Obama told the campaign in late summer that they wanted to help, they were pointed straight at Scranton.

Campbell knocks, but despite the car parked out front, no one answers. She fits a Pennsylvania for Obama pamphlet between the screen and the doorframe and walks up Washburn Street's steep incline to the next house on her list.

"It's like the seven stages of death, they're in denial, anger," said Mary Beth Colucci, 52, a marketing consultant and Queens native with a slight 'New Yawk' accent and a brisk walk, who started Forest Hills for Obama and organizes the rides to Scranton. "A lot of Hillary supporters have come to that acceptance stage. Some still haven't gotten through that, and that's where we come in to help."

Many of the group's canvassers believe that they have convinced disenfranchised Clinton fans and independents alike to vote for Obama - or simply to vote at all - by talking to Scranton residents.



Print Page

THE COURIER/Photo by Laurie Rich
Debbi Olley of Sunnyside and Theresa Campbell of Long Island, volunteers from the Queens group "Forest Hills for Obama," wait for a canvassing training session to begin in the Obama Campaign headquarters in Scranton, PA. More than 100 Forest Hills for Obama residents have commuted to Scranton since early September, as the campaign considers Pennsylvania a crucial battleground state.

As she did in New York State, Clinton beat Sen. Obama handily in Pennsylvania's presidential primary. In Scranton, Clinton's father's hometown, she got 74 percent of the vote to Obama's 26 percent.

However, after investing so much time and hope in Clinton, many in Scranton are still upset by her loss and said that they will not vote in the general election or are leaning toward Republican candidate Senator John McCain. Some former Clinton supporters even opened their own Democrats for McCain office this month in West Scranton.

Colucci believes that in her own Scranton canvassing, she has rerouted a number of disgruntled Hillary voters to Obama by talking to them about Clinton's own support of Obama, and the similarity of their stances on issues like taxes and healthcare.

Colucci is also quick to combat the rough-and-tumble label that Scranton has been given, saying that the stereotypes are untrue and that residents are diverse, open and fundamentally believe the same thing as the people she knows in New York.

"I think that people in Scranton are as much my neighbors as the people who live next door to me. We have the same concerns," she said.

About 100 Forest Hills for Obama volunteers have canvassed in Scranton so far, some multiple times. Colucci organizes the trips - volunteers drive their own cars and take other canvassers who pitch in \$15 a piece to cover expenses for the 130-mile tree-lined journey down Interstate 80 early in the morning to the Obama headquarters in downtown Scranton.

The trips usually begin between 7 and 9 a.m. from various meeting points in Queens and last until 9 or 10 p.m. Most volunteers are from Forest Hills, nearby Rego Park and Kew Gardens, but some, like Campbell, an accountant from Long Island, live outside the borough. The group plans to continue the trips through Election Day.

Back in Queens, Forest Hills for Obama has put on voter registration drives and debate-watching parties, but the bulk of its fall activity has been focused on calling and canvassing Scranton. The city's residents are getting used to the campaigning push.

"They're all coming," lifelong Scranton resident Celeste Godino, 46, said after Campbell left her doorway. Godino supported Clinton in the primary, but changed her vote to Obama after her college-aged daughter convinced her to do so. "The other day I had a McCain thing stuck on my door, and I trashed it"

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