



I WOULDN'T BE HERE NOW

Whatever our age when we first venture into the public arena, our inaugural steps will almost certainly seem modest, even inconsequential. And our goals may often seem improbable. As the familiar adage counsels, we can't run without first learning how to walk, and we can't walk without first learning how to crawl. That's true even when we're trying to act on the largest national or global stage.

Two years after environmentalist David Brower convinced Adam Werbach to run for the national Sierra Club board, Brower backed Adam again, this time to become the Club's national president, at age twenty-three. "I think he saw me as the club's future," Adam said. "I obviously had some trepidation as to whether I had the skills to do it. Here I was barely balancing my checkbook, having gotten through college by working as a handyman and doing office temp work. I'd been accepted to Columbia film school, was singing in a rock band, and trying to write a novel. Suddenly I'm thinking about applying to run a national organization with six hundred thousand members, a fifty million-dollar annual budget, and a staff of three hundred. College doesn't exactly prepare you for that. But I also felt I had something to offer. I decided, 'Why not run?'"

To Adam's surprise, the board elected him. During his two terms, the Club grew in members and donations, shifted \$4 million in annual spending from D.C. lobbying to local grassroots organizing, and spearheaded boycotts of major corporations with problematic environmental records. It also reached out to a new generation through MTV, Adam's syndicated college newspaper column, and partnerships with musicians like the Beastie Boys, eventually lowering the average age of members by ten years. Meanwhile, Adam led the Sierra Club into new alliances with hunters, farmers, religious groups, and low-income and minority communities.

“I’ve learned that going ahead and doing the best you can is better than waiting until you have all the answers,” Adam told me just after being reelected for his second term. “I learned that at the very beginning, when I was foolish enough to think anyone would even listen to a third-grader gathering signatures. If I hadn’t started back then, I wouldn’t be here now.”

WE’D FOLLOW UP AGAIN

Like Adam, Meredith Segal took on an immensely daunting challenge when she launched Students for Barack Obama on Facebook. It was July 2006, eight months before Obama officially launched his campaign. At the time, conventional wisdom suggested Obama had only a remote chance of winning the Democratic nomination, much less the presidency. But his Democratic Convention speech two years earlier had inspired Meredith, and she checked out *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*. “I just felt so excited that someone was talking about issues like the Iraq war and making college affordable. I admired Obama’s intelligence and clarity.” She decided to try to demonstrate enough support from students to help convince him to run, and to convince others to support him. Facebook seemed the perfect outreach medium, “because,” as she explained, “you can see whether something is just a crazy notion or whether a significant number of people are interested.”

Meredith grew up near Portland, Maine, “in a town with more cows than people.” She started her community involvement at age eight, “volunteering at a pre-school, reading to the kids.” In middle school and high school she built houses with Habitat for Humanity and brought together two rival high schools for a hockey tournament that raised \$4,000 for the Make-a-Wish Foundation, to fulfill the dreams of children with life-threatening diseases.

But she also began to question the limits of volunteerism. “It was exciting to help a family that never had a house of their own. But I’d also wonder why a country as wealthy as ours would let people be homeless to begin with. I’d get frustrated that, with all this effort,

I was only helping one family or one child. The more I got involved, the more I started thinking about broader solutions.”

When Meredith started at nearby Bowdoin College in 2004, she volunteered to do campus voter registration for the John Kerry campaign, and within a week, she was in charge of the effort. When her group went door-to-door, some students responded that “they were too busy or that their vote wouldn’t really matter, but we’d follow up again and again until they’d finally vote just to get some peace in their lives.” Their effort turned out almost every supporter on the campus, and Kerry took Maine. But of course, it wasn’t enough to make a difference at the national level. “Lots of us were crying,” Meredith said, “and I kept thinking, if only someone had been able to execute a similar program on the huge Ohio campuses, we could have had a very different outcome. I felt our efforts could either end with this disappointment or be channeled into the future.”

With the election over, Meredith shifted her attention to studies and a program that matched Bowdoin students with special needs kids. Concerned about the Iraq war, she also started Bowdoin Students for Peace and helped launch similar groups at other Maine schools. Meredith admitted that she has “a propensity to get involved in things—maybe too many.” But what made this possible—besides being organized, energetic, and able to stay up multitasking until 3:00 a.m.—was her willingness to jump in and learn as she went along without knowing how a particular project would turn out. Even when progress was elusive, as in the case of challenging America’s involvement in Iraq, or when she lost, as with the Kerry campaign, she trusted that her efforts would still help build something useful. She embodied that core leap of faith that Reverend Jim Wallis, editor of the wonderful radical evangelical magazine, *Sojourners*, describes as “believing despite the evidence and then watching the evidence change.”

Her Obama project built on everything she’d done so far. She began by inviting her friends, asked them to reach out to others, then systematically searched out Facebook members who’d mentioned Obama or his books and invited them as well. When she posted a request for a Web designer, a freshman from George Washington

University named Tobin Van Ostern responded. At that point, Tobin didn't have a definite candidate preference, but he was impressed by the size and enthusiasm of Meredith's group. Soon he was co-chairing the effort.

Meredith and Tobin spent the fall of 2006 building a chapter structure and working to enlist anyone who showed interest. They had over seventy chapters by the following January, when a senior Obama staffer called. Meredith asked if the candidate could speak to a group of students, and they agreed on a February event at Virginia's George Mason University. Meredith and Tobin's group would produce the audience and handle the logistics, while the campaign would cover the costs. Obama's staff told him that the rally was organized on "something called Facebook," and maybe 300 people would be there. Instead, 3,500 students showed up, from campuses as far away as Michigan and Florida. Many carried signs that said, "I drove all night to see you." Meredith and Tobin introduced Obama, who quoted Martin Luther King's statement that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends to justice," and challenged young people "to grab hold of that arc."

A week later, Obama formally launched his campaign, and Meredith and Tobin were invited to make their group the official student wing. After meeting with key staff in Chicago, they returned to school, continuing to reach out to new campuses while juggling classes, labs, and papers. With a half-dozen core volunteers, they created teams on each campus, focusing on sophomores and juniors, who likely would still be in school during the general election. Their conference calls generally began at 1:00 a.m. because, as Meredith said, "that's when students are free." And they continued to reach out on Facebook, drawing on a new feature where "if you logged in and found out that your friend had just joined Barack Obama '08, you were encouraged to check it out as well."

Obama was still a major underdog then, forty points down in the polls. But the volunteer energy and enthusiasm helped keep Meredith and Tobin going. "Lots of my friends," Meredith said, "would ask me 'Why are you dedicating your life to someone who's obviously going to lose?' Others would say, 'How many black presidents

has America had?" Some of those same people later became involved.

As Meredith remembered, "We had a sense that if we could get volunteers knocking on enough doors, making enough calls, and turning out enough people for the Iowa caucuses in particular, we had a real chance for it to end in victory. People were always saying that young people may join Facebook but they won't vote. But they weren't just signing up in our group. They were hanging signs in the dorms, registering their friends, coming to meetings, and knocking on doors. So why wouldn't they vote?"

The more people signed up, the more they enlisted their friends, calling and e-mailing them and using their personal Facebook pages to remind them of registration deadlines and ways to volunteer. By Fall 2007, the group included 600 chapters, with coordinators in virtually every state. They held contests to see which statewide leaders could establish more chapters and enlist the largest number of volunteers. "I'd fly in," Tobin said, "not even knowing where I was staying, and someone would find me a sofa bed. It's very much not in my personality to do something like that, but after a while it became routine."

Because Obama had to do well in the early contests, Meredith and Tobin asked students in states with late-breaking primaries or caucuses to focus on calling peers in the earlier ones, using extra cell minutes and campus directories that student volunteers scanned in to an Excel sheet. The group also targeted high school students who'd turn eighteen by November, so were eligible for the caucuses and primaries. With a national structure in place, it was easy for Meredith and Tobin to shift their focus to each successive primary state, "reminding California or Wisconsin students that their work wasn't done, and that they could still make a huge difference calling peers in Ohio, Texas, or North Carolina." Young voters and volunteers provided the critical margins in state after state, as they would in November.

"At the beginning it was important to demonstrate as much activity as we could," Meredith said, "so that people took the Obama campaign and the role of students seriously. After we'd proved that,

we focused more on effective action. We started working on what each chapter could do to make the maximum impact, instead of just adding new ones.”

Things shifted again once Obama clinched the nomination. In key battleground states, the campaign folded the student networks into their larger coordinated efforts, while Students for Barack Obama primarily focused on the remaining states, where they enlisted students in virtual phone banks and encouraged them to travel to key neighboring battlegrounds. Their official Facebook network now had 150,000 members, complemented by parallel state networks.

“Most of our leaders hadn’t been active before,” Meredith said. “But they got the training and experience of getting out the vote during the primaries. We made sure that school chapters led by seniors had strong younger members who’d be around in fall. When the home stretch hit after Labor Day, they were ready to funnel all of their energy into knocking on doors, making phone calls, and volunteering wherever it would make the most difference. We’d spent two years building our network. Now we had a chance to mobilize it.”

Amid all her political efforts, Meredith somehow managed to graduate the June before the election. Since the group was designed to be run by students, she turned the prime leadership over to Tobin and the others, and switched to helping run the national campaign’s Philadelphia offices. “We started off being part of a movement that hardly anyone believed had a chance. In the primaries, we knew the odds were against us, but we kept on anyway and changed them. Now everywhere you went you saw Obama signs, Obama gear, street musicians playing Obama songs. We just had to keep doing all the necessary tasks, with the same intensity and drive.” After spending Election Day on the final push, Meredith boarded a plane to Chicago and arrived at the Grant Park celebration just in time to hear Obama speak.

Meredith and Tobin were certainly exceptional organizers. But like anyone who acts, they grew into their skills. They had plenty of reasons to stay on the sidelines, from their regular student obligations to the sheer improbability of Obama’s initial candidacy. But like many others, they took one step, then another, getting more

deeply involved, each new effort preparing them for the next. Refusing to be daunted by the perfect standard, they were unwilling to wait to take up such huge responsibilities, or wait until Obama's chances improved. Instead, they took a leap of faith, trusting that their efforts and those of others could matter. Recognizing from the start that the campaign could succeed only through a nearly unprecedented level of community engagement, they set out to build that community in every way they could. "One of the fun things," Meredith said, "is that so many people own a piece of this campaign. There were millions who did something, even just making one phone call."

**Discussion Questions:**

- 1.) When was a time that you felt outside of your comfort zone? What influence did that have on you in the moment? How did that influence your future actions and growth as an individual?
- 2.) How can you (or How have you) take(n) what Loeb refers to as "inaugural steps" into the realm of community engagement and social action? What avenues exist in your current environment where you can actually implement the lessons learned from excerpts/readings like this?
- 3.) What can you do today to prepare yourself to recognize opportunities like the one's Adam Werbach, Meredith Segal, and Tobin Van Ostern heeded? Do opportunities like the ones these three embraced occur for everyone, or are they special cases for special people at special times?

Excerpt from:

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