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Editorial

Obama's candidacy should bring change for all elected officials

By DeWarren Langley
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Prior to departing the driveway for work, I decided to affix my Barack Obama campaign sticker to the back window of my car - a sticker that long sat idle on the kitchen counter for weeks.

Obama was scheduled to attend a private event in Research Triangle Park that was broadcast on CNN. Monday was typical of most Mondays - slow and uneventful. As Obama closed out his speech, I closed my web browser. The excitement, "Yes we can," was still roaring inside me as I sat at the computer steadily typing. About 20 minutes after Obama spoke, the silence of downtown Durham was rippled with sirens wailing in the background. Immediately, without thought, I peered out of the window to see his motorcade stopping at the Blue Coffee Café. I dashed from behind the desk.

The atmosphere was that of an atypical consensus and joy. The diversity of Durham littered the streets as the news of his presence slowly found its way around downtown. The Secret Service swiftly searched the spectators with hand-held metal detectors, and permitted myself and others to enter the café.

Obama casually purchased and personally served customers cake. As I stood, nervous with my knees buckling to the presence of the potential next president of the United States, the atmosphere shifted. The mood seemed different. The time was now. The change was occurring.

At this very moment, I began to understand the overarching theme and efforts of his campaign for the presidency - to redefine leader-citizen collaboration to create sustainable change. However, changing habits is hard work.

By nature, our national political structure does not readily encourage new approaches of building coalitions and creating sustainable change. The key to shifting the dynamics in the right direction lies in cultivating a dispersed cadre of leaders who will generate an atmosphere of friendly collegiality and are themselves models of respect, helpfulness and cooperation. Durham's leaders, just as Obama, must draw others into active, enthusiastic commitment for a greater Durham by spending time forging and cementing close relationships beyond mere political obligations.

The Obama campaign has deployed a new leadership style set on fundamentally changing how people operate through introducing new learning, leading and problem solving without the traditional barriers of separation. The paradox of trying to introduce a new brand of public service and engagement makes that a difficult task at best due to the resistance of the status quo. Our efforts to create the change we earnestly seek fall short of the mark, not only because of how business is conducted, but also because what leaders do or fail to do, i.e. change the emotional climate of local politics.

Elected officials must see that old habits are out of synch with the new culture of inclusion, civility and corporation. While changing deeply engrained habits is difficult, we see that old habits will not garner the results needed for change that must embrace the new brand of politics.

Our leaders must become emotionally engaged with the passion and dreams of the community, and join such engagement with strategy to connect with the possibilities of the future. Obama has created an atmosphere of finding passion for the work, for the strategy, for the vision and engaging hearts and minds in the search and creation of a meaningful future. Local leaders must cultivate the same atmosphere and direction for a better future.

The lesson of Obama's visit is that we can, as a community, stand in the way of the social and political progress we should make in transforming Durham. As a change catalyst, Obama recognizes the need for change, challenges the status quo and champions the new order even in the face of opposition, making the compelling argument to overcome the barriers to change. He shows us that we can achieve, solve and transform any aspect of our community if we simply come together and set aside the barriers which so often keep us apart.

No matter the strategy or program, if created in a vacuum, our efforts do little to foster the kind of change that our community needs today.

Truly, yes we can, but will we?

DeWarren Langley is a political activist who lives in Durham.

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