

Politics Gone Wild

The Bus Project comes to Lane County.

Forget the negative TV commercials, bone-dry voters' pamphlets and shady corporate contributions. If you want to get young people engaged in politics, you gotta speak to them. You gotta be hip, down, fun, *weird*.

That's the message from the Oregon Bus Project, arguably the hottest new political engine in the state. The organization breaks from traditional campaign activism, avoiding a partisan label (though it has yet to support a Republican candidate) and using slogans such as "Not left, not right, but forward." The Bus Project works for progressive political change over the long term, operating on the notion that volunteerism is the most effective way to battle big corporate money in elections. The movement started four years ago in Portland, and this month the Bus Project opened a permanent Lane County field office on 6th Avenue and Lawrence.

While politics-as-usual sails over the heads of many 18- to 35-year-olds, typically the age group with the lowest voter turnout, Bus Project volunteers seem to *get it*. They registered more than 6,000 youth at Portland hip hop shows last year, dared more than 30,000 candy-givers to "Trick or Vote" last Halloween, and drew a crowd of more than 2,000 at their "Candidates Gone Wild" debates in Portland. When Urban Outfitters

started selling a T-shirt that whined, "Voting is for Old People," the Bus Project retorted on a T-shirt of its own: "Vote, F*cker."

Sounds clowny, but the results are huge. In just four years, the Bus Project may have tilted the balance of power in the state Legislature; nine of the 10 state Senate candidates that the Bus Project supported in the last two elections won, resulting in a solidly Democrat-controlled Senate. Also victorious were six of the seven House candidates and nine of the 10 Lane County candidates that the Bus Project supported last election.

The Lane County office has only two paid staffers: UO student Courtney Anglin, 23, and recent UO grad Adam Petkun, 22. But they don't work alone — they are guided by a steering board of 16 and buttressed by a local volunteer base of more than 1,000 people, about a third of them students. Together, they run positive campaigns for candidates who value what they call "the six e's": education, equal rights, environment, electoral reform, economic fairness and 'ealth care.



Adam Petkun and Courtney Anglin outside the new Bus Project of Lane County office

"There is no acid test for what we're looking for," Petkun said, deadpan. He may have meant "litmus test," but the Kesey connection — freaky young people in a bus, trying to engage a lethargic populace — is hard to avoid.

In a typical Bus Project canvass, about 100 people work for four to five hours, knocking on several thousand doors and asking residents what matters to *them*. According to local Bus Project board chair James Mattiace, canvassing can increase voter turnout by up to 10 percent, whereas phone banking tends to have a minimal effect.

The Bus Project also aims to reach beyond short-term elections by nurturing new leaders. Both Anglin and Petkun are graduates of the Bus Project's new training

camp, called PolitiCorps, whose instructors last summer included former Oregon Govs. John Kitzhaber and Barbara Roberts. The Lane Bus Project will offer internships to college and high school students beginning winter term.

Petkun said that the local progressive community has welcomed the Bus Project to Lane County. Allied nonprofits include the Oregon League of Conservation Voters, FOOD for Lane County, Centro Latino, Sierra Club, 1000 Friends of Oregon, Stand for Children, NARAL Pro-Choice America and several labor unions. And while the Bus Project avoids

identifying with any political party, the local Dems are thrilled to have them around. "We're really excited that they have an office down here," said Val Hoyle, chair of the Democratic Party of Lane County. "We think they do fantastic work."

In the coming year, the local Bus Project will try to stir up sassy political dialogue across the county. Organizers will host monthly live events, beginning with a "Ballot Measure Peep Show" at 8pm next Tuesday, Dec. 13 at Cozmic Pizza, where local political leaders will introduce a range of progressive ballot measures for the November elections.

But wait — don't yawn. This is the Bus Project. "We're guaranteeing scandal and debauchery for that event," Anglin said. "It's not your father's politics." **EW**

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