

LANE COUNTY BERNERS

WHY SO MANY OREGONIANS ARE #FEELINGTHEBERN

by Mohammed Alkhadher

On Jan. 21, “Berners” commandeered the Cozmic building on 8th and Charnelton in downtown Eugene. There were about 30 people at Cozmic when the Lane County for Bernie Sanders meeting began. The space, often used for concerts, might have been quieter than usual, but the atmosphere was a mixture of excitement and optimism.

The Sanders supporters were diverse in age, ranging from teens, not yet old enough to vote, to senior citizens, as one woman humorously described herself. After the meeting, volunteers made posters, wrote letters to local publications or joined the phone-banking team.

Political consultant and Lane Community College board member Matt Keating was the first to speak at the Lane County for Bernie Sanders meeting. Keating emphasized the importance of phone banking to support the Iowa caucus that, at the time, loomed on the horizon. He urged volunteers to join action groups to raise awareness for their candidate.

On Monday, Feb. 1, the Iowa caucus concluded with a near draw between Sanders and former secretary of state Hillary Clinton. The caucus was the first statewide contest of this election cycle to decide who will represent the Democratic Party in the 2016 presidential race. Media pundits called it a win for Clinton, but Sanders fans saw it as a sign their candidate was on the rise.

On Feb. 9, Sanders won the New Hampshire primary by a 20-percent margin over Hillary Clinton, with 60 percent of the vote going to Sanders. With more primaries on the way, including the Democratic National Convention in July when the Dems choose their presidential candidate, Bernie Sanders volunteers across Lane County and Oregon are urging their fellow voters to #FeeltheBern.

The candidate — Bernie, as his supporters prefer to call him — is promising to fight income and wealth inequality, and to battle big money in politics as well as the escalating costs of health care and higher education — all issues dear to his passionate Oregon supporters.

Can Sanders win? That’s the burning (Berning?) question as his Oregon volunteers push to elect the 74-year-old democratic socialist from Vermont to American’s highest office.

MINIMUM WAGE

Kelsey Howe, a member of Lane County for Bernie Sanders who was organizing a phone-banking group at the meeting at Cozmic, says she’s supporting the candidate because he gives her hope. Howe says she suffers from seizures, and the medication doctors have prescribed for her condition cause depression. While depression is a medical condition, Howe says that Sanders’ policies on affordable health care, higher minimum wage and free education would alleviate the majority of her stress.

“I was getting really bad grades,” she says. “I really wasn’t able to work enough. I just wasn’t able to support myself. It was really stressful.”

Howe says that raising the minimum wage would mean everyone would have a chance at the American Dream. “Right now the American Dream isn’t possible on \$9.25 an hour,” she says. “It just simply isn’t. That’s why it’s so important to raise that.”

Sanders’ stance on minimum wage isn’t a new concept dreamed up just for the campaign. According to his official website, Sanders led the effort in the U.S. Senate to increase the minimum wage to \$10.10 per hour for federal contract workers, and he’s advocated for a \$15 minimum wage in the Senate.

“We must also establish equal pay for women,” Sanders writes on his website. “It’s unconscionable that women earn less than men for performing the same work.”

For now, Howe is helping with phone banking and keeping track of calls the phone bankers make.

“Overall time, our team has made 2,068 calls,” she says. “That’s not even counting the calls we were making before,” she adds of the efforts leading up to the Iowa caucus. “That’s not counting the 20 other people I have that aren’t really good with computers.”

THE CANDIDATE

Why does Sanders generate so much support? Any Democrat on social media knows that if you praise Hillary Clinton you will be hit with a passionate deluge of pro-Sanders comments from Bernie fans. Berners are dedicated to the white-haired man with the stooped shoulders and Brooklyn accent as well as the issues he stands for.

Keating, at a Bernie Sanders gathering earlier in January, channeled the Bard in his love for the Bern, proclaiming, “To Bern or not to Bern, that is the question” and “to Bern, perchance to dream” as he put Sanders’ platform into Shakespearean prose. From Photoshopped images of Sanders with cats to an appearance on Saturday Night Live with his doppelganger Larry David, Sanders is a pop culture phenomenon as well as a political candidate.

Sanders, who would be the first Jewish president, is running on a distinctly populist platform. He says he is for the people. In Eugene, Sanders supporters have been sending letters, making signs and phone banking to support his election.

The New York native has an extensive resume in domestic politics. Sanders has represented Vermont in the Senate since 2006, and served in the House for 12 years before that. While he may be running for presidency as a Democrat, Sanders served the state of Vermont as an Independent and avowed socialist for more than two decades.

“When Sanders announced back in May his candidacy, he was in single digits in favor with our national polls,”

says Tim Morris, a member of the Lane County for Bernie Sanders leadership. “Now he’s tying with a well-known former secretary of state, with only a 2 percent difference in the vote. We’ve proven that every single vote matters, every phone call makes a difference and our hard work is paying off.”

Sanders has publicly admitted that his opponent in the Democratic primaries has the majority of the party and the establishment’s support. But Sanders doesn’t necessarily want to be the “establishment” candidate. In the Feb. 4 Democratic debate hosted by MSNBC, Sanders said he’s relied on the middle class, emphasizing the zeal of individual supporters over big money and corporate donors. As of Feb. 1, his campaign had reported more than \$75 million in donations, averaging \$27 a piece.

In a Dec. 20 press release, the Sanders campaign announced that it broke the record for individual contributions with 2.3 million contributions. President Barack Obama, who previously held the record, won his re-election campaign with 2.2 million individual donations as of Dec. 31, 2011.

On SNL, Sanders managed to stay on message and still get laughs. “I am so sick of the 1 percent getting this preferential treatment. Enough is enough,” Sanders says in a skit. “We need to unite and work together if we’re all going to get through this.”

Reflecting that proletarian zeal, Lane County for Bernie Sanders is a grassroots campaign lead by a leadership committee, and the work is delegated among a group of volunteers.

CAMPAIGN FINANCE

“He’s an honest person. I don’t even like using the term politician,” says Joe Montez, a member of the Lane County for Bernie Sanders leadership. “He’s doing something that hasn’t been done by not taking money from any kind of corporations or Super PACs.”

Montez, a lifelong Democrat, volunteered in the past three presidential elections, and says he’d like to see the party become more progressive. “I feel like we’re going center-right, instead of to the left, and I’d like us to move more towards progressive values and ideas.”

Sanders has used his refusal to accept Super PAC funds as a platform for his election, and says he’ll move to repeal the *Citizens United* decision by the Supreme Court that removes restrictions on campaign contributions. Sanders says money in politics is undermining the political process.

Super PACs can raise and spend unlimited sums of money donated from corporations, unions, associations and individuals to advocate for or against political candidates.

“The American people are saying ‘No’ to a rigged economy,” Sanders said during his speech following the Iowa caucus.