

Notes from the Florida Democratic Party State Convention
Disney World Yacht Club Resort
October 9-11, 2009

State Party Chair Congresswoman Karen Thurman hosted a “meet and greet” reception on Friday evening. Although it was hot and humid on the boardwalk beside the lake, “a good time was had by all”.

The convention was officially opened on Saturday morning by Congresswoman Thurman. Several notables also spoke to the approximately 2000 delegates: Senator Bill Nelson, the Mayor of Orlando, 8th District Congressman Alan Grayson, the Hollywood actor who played the title role in “Milk”, Ms. Carmen Torres who is a local community organizer and recently appointed to the DNC, two candidates for Commissioner of Agriculture, and a lesser candidate.

Some crowd pleasing themes were sounded: “Take back the Florida Governor’s office; now it’s on us, nobody is going to do it for us.” “We have the largest voter registration in decades; climb the Blue Mountain “ (referring to Florida turning blue in the last election).

Some highlights of the afternoon trainings and panel discussions were:

1. Ruth’s List: How candidates can tailor their message and raise money to win.

Four pillars of the American psyche: Fear- voters want someone who can calm their fears; Consumerism - voters want someone who can assure that things will be better, such as who’s going to give the ability to get “stuff” done, jobs, etc.; Narcosims - candidates who believe in themselves and think they are the best; Religiosity - people (voters) want to believe that there are universal truths (mom and apple pie).

2. Politics of Florida: How to win in a state as diverse as Florida.

The internet is most effective in campaigns, using web sites and e-mails. This has reasonable cost. Television is moderately effective but is the most expensive. Voters can also have a low trust factor in TV ads. Candidates need to get their message across in the first 15-20 seconds.

3. Organizing for America Town Hall: A discussion with grassroots activists.

This was a most lively yet civil session that was over-subscribed to the extent that an adjoining room had to be opened up, but there was still standing room only. OFA National Director Mitch Stewart said that the effort was organized to continue to support the President’s agenda to address issues that were emphasized during the campaign. On November 5, 2008 a group looked around and said “we’ve won, now what do we do?” Hence, OFA was started. The effort wanted to keep Obama volunteers involved and engaged. Some things OFA is trying to accomplish:

Keep person-to-person contact
Focus on Health Care Reform: costs, choice, coverage
Build an organization based on truth and facts, not on lies and anger
Continue to clarify issue details, such as health care debates in Congress

At then, in a campaign-style rallying cry the Director said the following: “Forty-six million people in America, the greatest country on earth, have no health care. People who live in the shadows often fall through the cracks.” This caused a spontaneous chant to arise: “What do we want? Health Care Reform! When do we want it? Now!” This went on for a couple minutes, rising to a crescendo and the meeting was adjourned.

The next day (Sunday) the convention held a debate between the two leading candidates for Attorney General: State Senators Dave Aronberg and Dan Gelber. The moderator was a professor of political science at the University of South Florida. She said that the candidates were fairly evenly matched and by their own admission genuinely liked each other. The usual format was followed: opening statements by each, then questions and answers. Each had his cheering section in the audience. The moderator said this was allowed since the debate was not on TV. The candidates were civil to each other and the debate ended in a tie. It was determined that more differences between them would emerge as the campaign continued.

Final note. All the candidates, leading and lesser, had tables and booths set up and staffed by volunteers, young and old from 9 to 90. “Tons” of campaign materials were distributed along with various paraphernalia for sale. Caucus meetings were held, both one-on-one as well as in small groups. Candidates themselves roamed the halls and allowed many photo-ops. Memorable was Mr. Arth, a candidate for Governor, who pulled a little red wagon around.

I am grateful to have been chosen as a delegate and to have had the opportunity to gain this first-time experience.

George Stokes