



Then-candidate Barack Obama beams in the presence of Seattle lawyer Karen Russell and her NBA-legend dad, Bill Russell.

YES WE DID

How a latte-sipping Seattle lawyer helped put Barack Obama in the White House

By Karen Russell

It was a low point of then-candidate Barack Obama's presidential campaign: the week the Rev. Jeremiah Wright scandal peaked. In Portland for a fund-raiser, Obama looked like the weight of the world was on his shoulders. I was hanging out in the lobby of Portland's Benson Hotel with a friend when Obama saw me standing there. He walked over and teased us: "What are you doing here? You don't even live here."

I explained that I was bringing Maurice "Big Mo" Lucas, assistant coach of the Portland Trail Blazers, to the breakfast the next morning and that he was bringing a nice, big check for the campaign. Obama transformed before my eyes as the inner fan came out. "Big Mo!" he exclaimed, proceeding to run down Lucas' stats, name the basketball teams

the legend has played for and recount the infamous 1977 finals, in which Big Mo changed the course of the playoffs and the Trail Blazers ultimately beat Obama's Philadelphia 76ers.

It was nice to see Obama flash his killer smile again. For those few minutes, I knew my hard work had given him a break during one of the toughest times of the campaign. That felt really good.

I was a latte-sipping, Prius-driving, HuffPo [Huffington Post]-blogging, tree-hugging, eggheaded Seattle attorney, wearing several hats as a volunteer for the Obama for America campaign. Since meeting then-Sen. Obama in October of 2006, I knew that, if he ran for president, I would do all I could to convince America to hire the best person for the job.

My parents always said, "The more you give, the more you get back." My parents were spot-on. My life has been enriched by the amazing people I met on the campaign trail. I call them my "Obamabuds," and they come from all walks of life.

As a volunteer, I learned a set of leadership skills that I use every day in my role as a diversity counseling and employment attorney at Davis Wright Tremaine. I help organizations, law firms and other clients make change in their institutions.

PLENTY IN COMMON

I met my first Obamabuds at Obama's infamous standing-room-only book signing at Benaroya Hall in October 2006. It caused quite a frenzy when the \$5 tickets sold out instantly, then went for big bucks on Craigslist.

I fell in love with my hometown again that night. The Seattle crowd was great. So diverse. We were black and white, male and female, gay and straight, young and old. Looking around the room, I thought, "This crowd LOOKS like America!"

It was immediately and abundantly clear that Obama was the best orator in modern politics. I loved his healing message that "there's no blue-state America or red-state America; there's just America."

Like Obama, I believe we have more in common than what separates us. That, as Americans working shoulder to shoulder, there's no problem we can't solve.

Hockey legend Wayne Gretzky once said, "I skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been." That night, Obama was already helping us skate to where the puck was going to be.

My Obamabuds and I went on to become volunteers, donors and delegates who organized our neighborhoods. Seeing people from all walks of life come together was awe-inspiring.

Three watchwords of Obama's historic campaign were painted on the walls of his Iowa headquarters: "Respect. Empower. Include." It was a dazzling, inspirational, emotional roller coaster of a campaign, and I learned some effective ways to make change by following those leadership rules. They work just as well in families, organizations or firms: Show respect by having an authentic vision; empower others by asking for help; be inclusive by "hugging it out" with rivals.

Obama talked about a new kind of politics that focused on ideas rather than petty distractions. Even at the darkest times, he refused to swing the first punch. The voters appreciated it and rewarded him for keeping it real, though Sen. Hillary Clinton had the money, the machine and the name. The Clintons ran on inevitability. They ran a top-down campaign, while Obama had to build his from the ground up. The Clintons didn't seek a lot of help from outside the beltway. Obama couldn't afford not to. But he took this weakness and made it his strength. Through technology, the Obamabuds were able to connect, volunteer and donate.

Perhaps as important as being a great orator, Obama is an amazing listener. It was breathtaking to watch him work small rooms. People are inspired to work when they can see their own thumbprint on projects. But Obama also made it clear that, after soliciting input, he would be the "decider" and we wouldn't always agree with him.

Everyone I talked to was eager to give back to this country, whether they worked on Wall Street or Main Street. Obama

sensed that we wanted to be wanted. Once, he reminded me that I was one of the "owners" of the campaign and that the most important part of "Yes we can!!" was the "we."

Obama's staff encouraged me to play to my strengths. They pointed out that I had an excellent network for raising money and recruiting celebrity "surrogates"—because Barack and Michelle couldn't be everywhere at once—from the sports world and my prior work in Hollywood.

In particular, the campaign wanted African-American surrogates to go to South Carolina for the early primary. Some forget that, early in the campaign, Clinton had the majority of black voters supporting her. My successes included playing a role in getting Academy Award nominee and Emmy-winning actress Alfre Woodard to South Carolina; putting National Basketball Association legend and "Dancing with the Stars" contestant Clyde Drexler on the radio in Texas; and working on a fund-raiser with NBA legends Lenny Wilkens and Bill Russell (former Boston Celtics player, former Sonics coach—and my dad) in Seattle.

Though Obama was on the road to becoming our 44th president, he was humble enough to be overwhelmed by meeting these personal heroes. It's sometimes a burden to be the most important person in the room, so it was nice to be able to send people who would bring out the fan in him. In the challenging weeks and months to come, I like to think these memories will give our new president a smile when the weight of the world is on his shoulders. **L&P**

Karen Russell is a Harvard-educated lawyer and a diversity consultant at Davis Wright Tremaine in Seattle. She blogs on Huffington Post; frequently appears on CNN, MSNBC and TruTV as a legal and political analyst; produced the film Good Luck Chuck, starring Jessica Alba; and wrote for the NBC sitcom The Single Guy. She volunteered with the Obama for America campaign and is the proud daughter of NBA legend Bill Russell. Karen was appointed to Obama's Justice and Civil Rights transition team to help vet agency appointments and review agency positions.