



TRAINING A NEW GENERATION

By Mike Journee

“It’s really quite simple for someone who’s grown up working with computers, but not so much for my grandma who can’t touch a computer without a Post-It note next to the on-button.”

Sophomore Trevor Engman is excited about the presidential election. Really excited.

As a recipient of Boise State’s Presidential Civic Leadership Scholarship, Engman has already earned his stripes as a civically engaged young man. Under normal circumstances, it’s likely that his first presidential election as an eligible voter would have been a landmark event for this 18-year-old physics major.

But like a lot of young people across the country who will vote for the first time this fall, Engman’s enthusiasm for this campaign season has been pushed off the charts by the candidacy of Barack Obama. So when he had a chance to become an integral part of the electoral process, he jumped at it.

It was through his weekly class with last year’s inaugural cohort of 28 Presidential Scholars that Engman first heard about the poll worker training program jointly created and coordinated by Boise State’s Social Sciences Research Center (SSRC) and Ada County’s elections division.

“This is my first opportunity to vote,” Engman says. “As a poll worker I get to be close to the process and watch everything as it happens. It’s really fun and exciting.”

Those words are music to Ashley Schulz-Talbot’s ears. Like many election officials around the country, Schultz-Talbot (BA, political science, ’02; MPA, ’05), an election specialist with Ada County, and her colleagues are struggling to get by with a dwindling pool of aging poll workers. With an ever-increasing average age of 74, they are generally less than enthusiastic about new advents in voting technology.

College students like Engman make good poll workers because they’re young, mobile, adaptable, able to withstand the long days at the polling station, tech-savvy and they work cheap, says Carole Nemnich, project manager for the SSRC and coordinator of its poll worker training program.

“What better place than a university campus to find a mass of people willing to work bizarre hours for low pay?” says Nemnich.

POLL



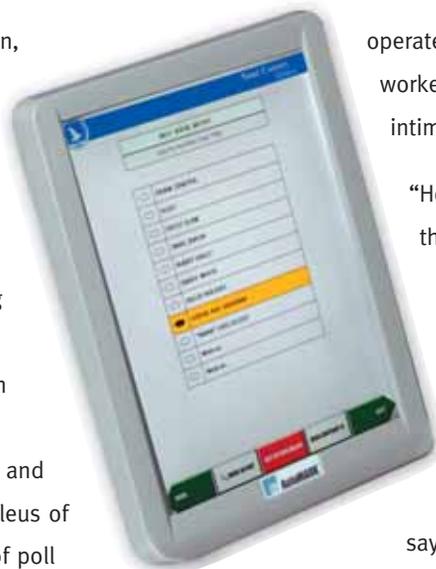
SCHULTZ-TALBOT,
ENGMAN AND NEMNICH
WITH ADA COUNTY'S
AUTOMARK ASSISTED
VOTING DEVICE.

WORKERS

While the program is stridently non-partisan, Nemnich and Schultz-Talbot say Obama's popularity among young people presents an unusual opportunity when twenty-something apathy toward politics has been the norm. They hope Obama's coattails are long enough to bring their students into election work long-term and help them view it as a patriotic duty in the name of American democracy, much as their grandparents did. They hope Engman and his fellow presidential scholars are the nucleus of an entirely new generation and new type of poll worker.

Last year, after undergoing training in voter registration, recruitment and project management, Engman and his fellow presidential scholars helped recruit and train 75 new Ada County poll workers from the Boise State student body for the primary election. Nemnich and Schultz-Talbot expect about 150 Boise State students to be working the polls in one capacity or another during the general election in November.

A key driving force behind the creation of this program, they said, was the Help America Vote Act. Approved by Congress in 2002, in large part as a response to the infamous glitches of the 2000 presidential election, this law mandates that each polling station in the country have some kind of assisted voting device for people with disabilities.



operate and troubleshoot. But to an 80-year-old poll worker used to the traditional paper ballot, it's an intimidating change.

"Honestly, these machines scare the socks off of the typical poll worker," Nemnich says.

To the Game Boy generation, however, they're a snap – a key reason to recruit college-aged poll workers.

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touch a computer without a Post-It note next to the on-button."

The AutoMARK machines are a particular specialty of Engman's. In fact, Schultz-Talbot is so impressed with his talents, she's hired him as an intern at Ada County to help coordinate the county's entire fleet of the assisted voting devices during the general election.

While technical troubleshooters like Engman are a key to the success of fulfilling the provisions of the Help America Vote Act, the loss of election workers to advanced age and death is creating a demand for traditional poll workers as well. In fact, the polling station at the Boise Valley Christian Communion Church was entirely run by Boise State students during this year's primary election.

This fall, Schultz-Talbot and Nemnich are trying to recruit student organizations, such as student government, Greeks and other clubs, to work polls or even take over an entire polling station to raise money. Typical poll workers earn \$125 for a full day of work on election day.

"What a great civically focused fundraiser," Nemnich says. "So far, those who've done this have really enjoyed it. We hope that word spreads and we draw more and more students into the project."

And while Schultz-Talbot and Nemnich are focused on finding raw manpower to help fill the void left by aging poll workers, their comments always come back to citizenship. Often the exposure these young poll workers have to the electoral process is enough to get them engaged in the most



A good idea, right? Well, it depends.

Most assisted voting devices – Ada County uses a brand called AutoMARK – are single-purpose computers that by today's standards are relatively elementary to set up,

fundamental element of democracy: voting.

“I think it got some of them into the voting booth for the first time,” Nemnich says.

Ultimately, Nemnich says, it’s the lessons the students learn from people like Deborah Allen (BA, social science, ’06; MPA, ’08) that are most valuable. Because of the AutoMARK machines that many of the Boise State poll workers administer, she was able to cast her first truly independent ballot.

Allen (pictured right) has voted in every election since she was 18, which was long enough ago for her to be a grandmother now. But because she’s been blind since she was a little girl, she could never do so without the direct assistance of a poll worker, volunteers who brought absentee ballots to her house or an overbearing ex-husband who always marked her ballot for his favorite candidate, not hers.

“I never truly had any privacy when I voted,” Allen says. “That’s a treasured thing in our country.”



But in 2006, Allen successfully cast her first truly independent and secret ballot with the help of the AutoMARK’s audio function, which allows voters with impaired vision to listen to choices over headphones and walks them through the voting process.

“I’m really looking forward to the time when this is so mainstream that people don’t think twice about it,” Allen says.

Those days are coming, according to Schultz-Talbot and Nemnich. And it’s people like Engman and his peers who will lead the way.

“I think the really nice thing is seeing the light bulb come on in people’s head when they realize that they can make a difference, that they can do this, that their vote counts,” Nemnich says.



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208.426.3116