



## ***How about Voting, for a Change?***

### **Statewide Poverty Action Network Gets Busy in Kent, Auburn**

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By Patrick Schultz  
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A rusted out, early '80s Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme sits in the driveway, and bins of recyclables - cans, bottles, and newspapers - clutter the yard. A small garden is overrun with weeds, and unused garden tools lean against the peeling gray paint, half-blocking the path to the porch. We ring the doorbell, and an explosion of barking erupts from dogs behind closed curtains. A large man in his late fifties, shirtless, appears at the threshold. My partner starts to talk, but the guy is already shaking his head. "You can leave some stuff with me if you want, maybe I'll sign next time." We hand the man a flyer, and he closes the door.

It's a sunny Saturday morning, and I've taken my coffee to go, driving down to St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Auburn to volunteer with the Statewide Poverty Action Network, a group with 5,000 members on a mission to register voters and increase voter turnout in some of the poorest neighborhoods in Washington State. A program of the Fremont Public Association, SPAN has done their homework. They've identified the state's poorest neighborhoods with low voter turnout and tight races in past elections, and they've conducted statewide surveys and focus groups, arriving at three issues that were of greatest concern to low-income voters: affordable health care, livable wages, and the rising cost of tuition. Locally, they're focusing their resources on Auburn and Kent, where voter turnout has been as low as 35 percent, and average incomes are the lowest in King County (According to SPAN, per capita in Auburn is \$19,630, household is \$39,208, Kent per capita \$21,390, household \$46,046).

SPAN director Aiko Schaefer is quick to dismiss my urban, liberal stereotype of low-income suburbanites as gun-toting, Eyman-supporting rednecks. "A lot of people in these neighborhoods are regular folks, wanting to put food on the table," she says. "They're just as hungry and worried about their future as low-

income people in downtown Seattle."

In addition to registering voters, SPAN is also asking those who are registered to sign a petition saying they care about the issues of health care, livable wages, and affordable tuition, and that they promise to vote this November. The signatures will be sent to gubernatorial candidates in the fall.

### **Road Trip to Auburn**

I meet up with the group in the church's auditorium, where about 20 volunteers snack on muffins, juice and coffee while Kim Justice, Field Coordinator for SPAN, gives a pep talk and hands out maps of neighborhoods.

I ask her why so many people in these precincts aren't voting. "It really is a powerlessness that people feel," she says. "Kids are growing up in homes where parents don't talk about politics, there's an idea that politicians are 'dirty,' and that [voters] can't make a difference. We want them to know they can make a difference."

Armed with absentee voter registration forms and clipboards, the volunteers I meet are largely from Seattle neighborhoods -- Wallingford, Fremont, and Ballard - and I realize that this trip has taken me further south than I've been in years.

Volunteer Bernadette Roberts of Ballard says her sole reason for being here is to get Bush out of office. "We need a change," she says. "I think there are enough people using their brains out there. People are frustrated."

As we pile into cars and head out to our assigned neighborhoods, I team up with Tom Donlea, Board Chairman of SPAN.

Walking through an Auburn neighborhood, I ask Donlea what reasons he hears for people not voting. He says "the responses we hear are 'Don't vote, don't believe in it, not interested.'"

But as we start knocking on doors, it becomes clear that not all the residents in this neighborhood feel that way.

We walk across a freshly mowed yard to the porch of a ranch-style home. A middle-aged woman answers the door, and Donlea says, "Hi, we're from the Statewide Poverty Action Network and we're out registering voters today." The woman nods, yes, she's a registered absentee voter. She says she'll definitely be voting in November. "It's just terrible, what's going on right now," she says, mentioning the economy and the war in Iraq. Her daughter is serving in Kuwait. "It doesn't make sense." She signs the petition and thanks us.

This is a supposedly a poor neighborhood, but many of these houses look comfortably middle class. "Sure, but how much did these people pay for them?" Donlea says. "Probably not very much if the property's been in the family for any number of years. Plus, with the refinancing boom, who knows how big their mortgage is, how much they still owe. Maybe they should be a lot farther along in their payments than they actually are, and this house is their retirement."

At the next house, four cats are sunbathing on the porch. I ring

the doorbell and a Hispanic teenage girl answers. "Hi, I'm from the Statewide Poverty Action Network, and we're registering voters and collecting signatures to send to legislators to promote health care, affordable tuition and livable wages in Washington State. Are your parents home?" She looks over her shoulder to a woman positioned on cushions on the floor in front of the TV, , who looks over at me and says "I'll sign." She seems sick or immobile. The girl brings the petition over to the woman, and then brings it back, smiling. We talk about her cats. She's chatty, glad to have a visitor. I say thank you and move on to the next house.

Many homes on this street have front doors that look unused. Porches are blocked with locked screen doors, doorbells are broken or absent, and flowerpots partially block the path to one porch. In these neighborhoods, it seems like people just drive into their garages and enter their house that way, rarely using the front door. Not especially conducive to neighborly relations, I think to myself.

The house with the greenest lawn on the block has a doorbell that sounds like a church on Sunday. The woman who answers has perfectly coiffed hair in a tight brown perm and she cuts me off, saying "you know, we got a message the other day from the sheriff's department, warning us not to sign anything because convicted criminals are making money gathering signatures." I assure her that I'm not a criminal, but she's formal, polite and dismissive. "No thank you, but I'll take your information, just so I can look at it."

It's another Saturday in Auburn, and this time the weather is not so accommodating. It's raining heavily as I hesitate in the street next to a sign that says "Absolutely no Solicitors, no Trespassing" just outside an apartment complex built around its own parking lot. Front doors face the rows of parked cars, and small decks with bicycles and barbecues are visible from the street. I straighten up with the authority of a meter reader, walk confidently across the parking lot with my clipboard, past an indifferent resident, and up to the first door.

The woman who answers is a registered absentee voter already, but agrees to sign the petition and takes a flyer. The next two doors, no one is home. But the next, a kindly older Hispanic gentleman answers. No, he isn't an absentee voter, but he'd like to be one. Yes, he'll sign the petition.

"You're not going to make me vote for Bush, are you?" he says, thick-accented and smiling. "No, sir!" I laugh. We talk for a few minutes about politics, the price of gas, and the weather. It's clear we have a similar world view, and I'm reminded what a pleasure it is to find common ground with people you'd normally never have a chance to talk with.

And it's extra nice when they vote.

*Patrick Schultz is a contributing writer for Real Change. For more information on voter registration, or to volunteer for a*

registration drive, contact SPAN at 206-694-6794 or  
[www.povertyaction.org](http://www.povertyaction.org).