

Y-Press Profiles of Young Political Activists

PART I

Copyright © 2008 Y-Press



By Sarah Zabel, 15, Y-Press

**Asher Heimermann, 14
Sheboygan, Wisconsin**



Why does this middle-schooler call himself Wisconsin's youth activist? At age 14, Asher Heimermann has a Web site (www.asherheimermann.com) with tens of thousands of visitors, a radio show that airs every week, and a voice that demands to be heard.

Asher began his political activism when his hometown of Sheboygan was debating the police department's future location. He was displeased with the fluctuating opinion of the mayor, so he began to speak out. Soon he started a Web site featuring his opinions on various issues, as well as a list of activism opportunities, a chat room where visitors could chat live with him, a personal profile, polls, a guestbook for comments and questions, and links to his past radio shows, which have included interviews with political figures and discussions of school events and issues.

What do you consider your biggest success?

I've had over 97,000 visitors to asherheimermann.com since it was started in early 2007. I think the advantages of me being in politics are pretty great. I got to meet State Senator Joe Leibham (a Republican) of Wisconsin. I'm gotten to meet the mayor of my city. I've had communication between the city clerk, the company administrator, and I could go on and on. Being in politics has really changed my life.

What's the funniest thing someone has said to you about your work?

I don't know if it would be funny, but it's those negative attack ads or negative talks about my work in the community. Those people that are against my work come out and start attacking me based on my party affiliation, religion, and on and on. But it's those negative attacks that make me laugh. Those negative attacks will not hurt me. They will not hurt my supporters, because we are one America. We are not the red America. We are not the blue America. We are simply one America working for a better and stronger nation.

Which party do you believe will come out on top during the 2008 presidential elections?

Well, I would think the Democrats would, because we have had President Bush, George W. Bush, in office for eight years. I think America is thinking of a new direction, a new party and a new person to do the job and lead America forward. In my opinion, I think the American people want change. They strongly want change, because they're sick of seeing the same old person leading us in the wrong direction.

By Katie Bolinger, 17, Y-Press

**David Burstein, 19
Weston, Connecticut**



When David Burstein was in high school, it never occurred to him that politics might be irrelevant to his life. He grew up watching CNN and accompanying his parents in voting booths. Frustrated by the outcome of the 2004 election, he became passionate about showing young people the importance of voting and political involvement.

Now, four years later, David is a student at Haverford University in Pennsylvania and has appeared on various media outlets, including CSPAN and ABC World News Tonight, to talk about *18 in '08*, his short documentary about youth involvement in politics. The film is aimed at 17- to 24-year-olds and attempts to show them that their vote can make a big difference in the 2008 election. It features a variety of politicians—Sens. John Kerry and Joe Lieberman among them—as well as other political activists and college students.

The film has its own Web site, www.18in08.com, and has spawned a nonprofit organization that shares its goals. This summer, David hopes to sponsor a presidential debate, embark on a university tour, and even launch a fashion campaign complete with T-shirts and bracelets in hopes of persuading young people that their votes matter.

How did you come up with the idea to make this movie?

It was sort of a response to the 2004 election, sitting around the next day after the returns came in, saying, you know, “Why are there so few young people that turn out? What could be done to really inspire and motivate people to participate in the process?”

What do you hope young people will get out of your film?

I hope they will be inspired, encouraged and want to participate. But it’s not just about registering to vote; it’s about long-term engagement in the political process.

If you could talk with the candidates about any issue, what would it be?

Jobs—I think that’s something that’s really important, especially with what’s going on right now with the economy. Fiscal responsibility also. In general, people have no idea what kind of debt we are racking up in this country, that when we are 30, 35, 40—no matter how successful we are—we’re going to have to suffer to pay it off. ... It’s not going to hurt our parents, but it’s going to hurt us.

By Hrishi Deshpande, 12, Y-Press

**Jonathan Lykes, 17
East Cleveland, Ohio**



Shaw High School senior Jonathan Lykes is not your typical high schooler. As a matter of fact, he was called an “overachiever” by The Columbus Dispatch. You see, for the past year, Jonathan has been helping to lead the Ohio Youth Agenda, a group of high school students throughout the state who gather yearly to promote issues that matter most to Ohio’s youth.

In December, almost 200 teens gathered in Columbus to draw up the 2008 agenda, which calls for, among other things, more funding and services to schools to better prepare students for life afterward. (To check out the full agenda, go to www.myspace.com/ohioyouthvoices.) And soon, agenda members will lead assemblies in their schools to try to register every student who will be eligible to vote in November, as part of the nationwide “No Vote, No Voice” drive.

Can you please elaborate on the “No Vote, No Voice” campaign?

After we register all the students to vote in each county, we have a press event and pass on all the youth registration forms to the board of elections. So hopefully, just bringing youth together downtown at the board of elections will show that we are trying to defeat the stereotype that youth don’t really care.

Are you doing anything with the 2008 presidential election and national stuff, or is it just mostly Ohio and regional?

We are non-partisan, so we don’t take sides. (But) Ohio is a swing state, so if we can get 10,000 or 15,000 new youth voters in the state, that definitely give us the pull and puts us on the radar screen of a lot of these candidates.

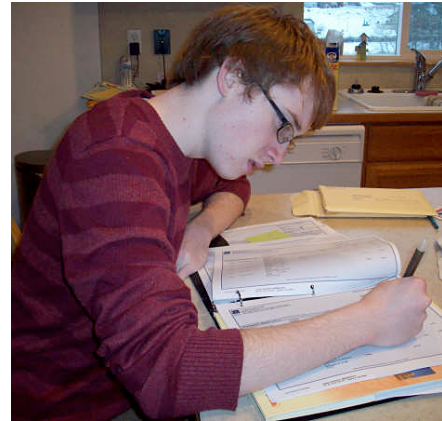
According to MTV’s Rock the Vote, this is the first year the leading Democratic candidates have youth directors and youth voter outreach programs. What do you think has changed to allow youth to feel part of the process?

I just think this is a big year once you start talking about change. I think that message of change is spreading throughout the country, and that is really going to make a difference of bringing the youth vote out. People start to get interested again and maybe think something does matter, maybe my vote isn’t insignificant anymore.

By Quinn Andrews, 13, Y-Press

**Nic Morden, 18
Spokane, Washington**

Nic Morden is an officer in the Junior State of America chapter at Central Valley High School in Spokane. JSA is a nationwide, non-profit organization composed of more than 500,000 high school students who are interested in politics and current events. The organization is entirely student-run, within each chapter and at the state and national levels (see www.jsa.org).



Nic explained that his chapter gets together with JSA groups at other schools for debates on issues and to hold mock legislative sessions and mock trials. In May, his school is holding a mock political election. “We take a whole day and the whole school is in the gym, and we elect people, and like people represent the different candidates,” he explained.

What do you consider your biggest success in the Junior State of America?

We have garnered a lot of interest in (the chapter). Last year we had maybe 10 or so people in it, and this year we have about 30. So we’re getting a lot of people involved, and they have connections to other schools in the area and they’re getting different schools involved.

If you could pass any piece of legislation, what would it be?

Honestly probably for me, I would be interested in working to pass a bill for the legalization of medical marijuana throughout the country. I’ve read a lot of books on it, and I think it just has a lot of potential and is largely ignored.

What advice would you give to other kids who want to get politically involved?

Look for different clubs or organizations around your area that are specifically for politically active kids. They definitely get you in touch with people who have similar beliefs as yours. They’re just really fun things to do.

Jordan Denari, 17, Y-Press

**Rachel Swanson, 15
Lexington, Kentucky**

Fifteen-year-old Rachel Swanson has a history of political activism. Coming from a politically active family (her dad worked as a legislative aide for Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin) she's continuing the tradition at Bryan Station High School, where she is vice president of the Young Democrats club. Rachel's only a freshman, but she's helped the club accomplish a lot: They campaigned for the Democratic candidate for governor (Steve Beshear, who won the election); registered 18-year-olds to vote; and hosted movie nights at the school featuring documentaries focused on issues of political interest, like *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Sicko*.



Rachel has embarked on a lot of political activism on her own, too. After finding out that Barack Obama—whom she supported even before his run for the presidency—was coming to speak in Lexington last August, she wanted to be involved. She signed up to be a ticket captain, knowing that if she sold 40 \$25 tickets to the event, she would be awarded a ticket—and a meeting with Obama!

Rachel, who was Obama's youngest ticket captain in the country, met her goal and was able to chat with the senator and stand behind him during his speech. Rachel's enthusiasm for Obama was apparent during our interview; she even slipped once, referring to him as “the president.”

What first drew you to support Barack Obama?

I first heard Barack Obama on NPR, and I was just listening to the interview and he was just absolutely hilarious. And I just thought, “Wow, it's pretty cool that he can be serious at his job and also appeal to a lot of people.”

What was the coolest thing about meeting Obama?

The rest of my heroes — Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, and Eleanor Roosevelt — are already dead. It was good to meet one that's alive.

How have your friends responded to your political activism?

They're completely bewildered why I would want to go into politics, why I would want to watch it on TV rather than just blow it off. In middle school, every time I talked about it, everybody was like, “What are you talking about?”

With the approaching election, what are the most important thing American kids need to remember?

The most important advice for people today is, “You don't have to have the same opinions as everyone else. You just have to have opinions.” That's what runs our country.