The Dean Connection

By SAMANTHA M. SHAPIRO
Published: December 7, 2003

Last February, Clay Johnson, 26, took a trip from Atlanta to the Dominican Republic to visit his girlfriend, Merrill, who was studying linguistics at a university there. He carried an engagement ring in his pocket, but when he arrived, he said, Merrill was cold and distant, and he never gave it to her. Before he left, Merrill told him that she didn't love him anymore.

He returned to his apartment in Atlanta, where he worked as a freelance technology consultant. His place was also serving as a storage space for Merrill's possessions, in boxes, and as a temporary home for her two cats. He was allergic to the cats. He stripped to his underwear, lay on the floor in a fetal position and remained there for days, occasionally sipping from an old carton of orange juice. "I was completely obliterated," he says. "I didn't know something like that could actually cause physical pain."

Johnson's friends kept calling, trying to think of something that would get him out of the house. Finally they hit on one: Howard Dean.

Johnson had been talking about Howard Dean for about a year. He had never voted, but after his mother developed cancer and could no longer afford her health insurance, he became interested in politics. When he looked at the various Democrats running for president, he felt drawn to Dean right away. He liked the health care plan that Dean had instituted in Vermont and his forthright style, and later appreciated Dean's clear opposition to the war in Iraq.

At his friends' urging, Johnson attended a Dean gathering last spring. Sixty people showed up, more than could fit in the coffee shop that Meetup.com had selected for them. So they gathered in the parking lot instead. Everyone took a turn saying why he or she liked Howard Dean. Someone handed out Dean stickers, and then people broke up into twos and threes to chat. Johnson spent most of the meeting talking with a young Duke graduate named Julie Reeve, who, he says, was "really smart." She was also, he says, "the most beautiful girl I have ever seen."
Johnson didn't think he had much of a chance with Julie Reeve, but at least he had a reason to get up off the floor. He threw himself into the Dean campaign. He began knocking on doors, reading books on precinct districting and setting up databases. He saw Reeve at campaign events, and even went out with her a couple of times apart from their campaign activities, but he couldn't tell if she liked him.

In May, the Dean campaign posted a notice on its Web site saying that it needed a programmer familiar with social-network software to work in the headquarters in Burlington, Vt. Johnson quit his job, put the money from Merrill's engagement ring toward a Volkswagen Passat and headed out to Burlington.

Johnson's story is actually one of the more conventional at the Dean headquarters; he arrived with a paying job that he had secured in advance. Alex Perkins, a 32-year-old policy coordinator for the campaign, quit his job, sold his house in Seattle and showed up at the campaign office offering to work free. Austin Burke, 22, who researches the other candidates, drove from Phoenix -- it took him six days -- and then just wandered around Burlington asking where the Dean office was. Matthew Bethell, 20, a British university student, left London and took the year off to volunteer full time in New Hampshire, even though he can't vote in American elections.

Long before Howard Dean was considered a plausible candidate for president, he seemed to emit some sort of secret call that made people, many of them previously apolitical, drop everything and devote themselves to his campaign. Even after the campaign's 45 official intern positions were filled, people kept showing up -- mostly young people, but also senior citizens in R.V.'s and middle managers from Microsoft.

At the headquarters of most political campaigns, there's a familiar organizational structure: a group of junior employees carrying out a plan devised by a bunch of senior advisers. The Dean headquarters feels different: a thin veneer of Official Adults barely hovers above a 24-hour hive of intense, mostly youthful devotion. When the adults leave, usually around 10 p.m., the aisles between cubicles are still cluttered with scooters and dogs; when they return in the morning, balancing just-microwaved cinnamon buns and coffee, they climb over pale legs poking out from beneath their desks and shoo sleeping volunteers off their office couches.

For each person who decided to arrive unannounced at the Dean office, dozens more stayed home and appointed themselves director of one unofficial Dean organization or another. There are now 900 unofficial Dean groups. Some of the activities undertaken on behalf of Dean qualify as recognizable politics: people hand out fliers at farmer's markets or attend local Democratic Party meetings. Others take steps of their own invention: they cover their pajamas with stickers that say "Howard Dean Has a Posse" and wear them to an art opening, or they organize a squadron to do "Yoga for Dean." They compose original songs in honor of Dean. (About two dozen people have done that; another man wrote a set of 23 limericks.) They marry each other wearing Dean paraphernalia. Overweight supporters create Web pages documenting, in daily dispatches, their efforts to lose 100 pounds in time for Dean's election. One woman, Kelly Jacobs of Hernando, Miss., took it upon herself to travel around the Memphis area for 15 weeks, standing on a single street corner for a week at a time, to promote Dean. I saw a middle-aged man at a garden party in New Hampshire preface a question to Dean by saying he was associated with Howards for Howard. Dean nodded, as if the man had said he was with the AARP.
December 7, 2003

The Dean Connection

By SAMANTHA M. SHAPIRO

Last February, Clay Johnson, 26, took a trip from Atlanta to the Dominican Republic to visit his girlfriend, Merrill, who was studying linguistics at a university there. He carried an engagement ring in his pocket, but when he arrived, he said, Merrill was cold and distant, and he never gave it to her. Before he left, Merrill told him that she didn't love him anymore.

He returned to his apartment in Atlanta, where he worked as a freelance technology consultant. His place was also serving as a storage space for Merrill's possessions, in boxes, and as a temporary home for her two cats. He was allergic to the cats. He stripped to his underwear, lay on the floor in a fetal position and remained there for days, occasionally sipping from an old carton of orange juice. "I was completely obliterated," he says. "I didn't know something like that could actually cause physical pain."

Johnson's friends kept calling, trying to think of something that would get him out of the house. Finally they hit on one: Howard Dean.

Johnson had been talking about Howard Dean for about a year. He had never voted, but after his mother developed cancer and could no longer afford her health insurance, he became interested in politics. When he looked at the various Democrats running for president, he felt drawn to Dean right away. He liked the health care plan that Dean had instituted in Vermont and his forthright style, and later appreciated Dean's clear opposition to the war in Iraq.

At his friends' urging, Johnson attended a Dean gathering last spring. Sixty people showed up, more than could fit in the coffee shop that Meetup.com had selected for them. So they gathered in the parking lot instead. Everyone took a turn saying why he or she liked Howard Dean. Someone handed out Dean stickers, and then people broke up into twos and threes to chat. Johnson spent most of the meeting talking with a young Duke graduate named Julie Reeve, who, he says, was "really smart." She was also, he says, "the most beautiful girl I have ever seen."

Johnson didn't think he had much of a chance with Julie Reeve, but at least he had a reason to get up off the floor. He threw himself into the Dean campaign. He began knocking on doors, reading books on precinct districting and setting up databases. He saw Reeve at campaign events, and even went out with her a couple of times apart from their campaign activities, but he couldn't tell if she liked him.

In May, the Dean campaign posted a notice on its Web site saying that it needed a programmer familiar with social-network software to work in the headquarters in Burlington, Vt. Johnson quit his job, put the money from Merrill's engagement ring toward a Volkswagen Passat and headed out to Burlington.

Johnson's story is actually one of the more conventional at the Dean headquarters; he arrived with a paying job that he had secured in advance. Alex Perkins, a 32-year-old policy coordinator for the campaign, quit his job, sold his house in Seattle and showed up at the campaign office offering to work free. Austin Burke, 22, who researches the other candidates, drove from Phoenix -- it took him six days -- and then just wandered around Burlington asking where the Dean office was. Matthew Bethell, 20, a British university student, left London and took the year off to volunteer full time in New Hampshire, even though he can't vote in American elections.

Long before Howard Dean was considered a plausible candidate for president, he seemed to emit some sort of secret call that made people, many of them previously apolitical, drop everything and devote themselves to his
campaign. Even after the campaign's 45 official intern positions were filled, people kept showing up -- mostly young people, but also senior citizens in R.V.'s and middle managers from Microsoft.

At the headquarters of most political campaigns, there's a familiar organizational structure: a group of junior employees carrying out a plan devised by a bunch of senior advisers. The Dean headquarters feels different: a thin veneer of Official Adults barely hovers above a 24-hour hive of intense, mostly youthful devotion. When the adults leave, usually around 10 p.m., the aisles between cubicles are still cluttered with scooters and dogs; when they return in the morning, balancing just-microwaved cinnamon buns and coffee, they climb over pale legs poking out from beneath their desks and shoo sleeping volunteers off their office couches.

For each person who decided to arrive unannounced at the Dean office, dozens more stayed home and appointed themselves director of one unofficial Dean organization or another. There are now 900 unofficial Dean groups. Some of the activities undertaken on behalf of Dean qualify as recognizable politics: people hand out fliers at farmer's markets or attend local Democratic Party meetings. Others take steps of their own invention: they cover their pajamas with stickers that say "Howard Dean Has a Posse" and wear them to an art opening, or they organize a squadron to do "Yoga for Dean." They compose original songs in honor of Dean. (About two dozen people have done that; another man wrote a set of 23 limericks.) They marry each other wearing Dean paraphernalia. Overweight supporters create Web pages documenting, in daily dispatches, their efforts to lose 100 pounds in time for Dean's election. One woman, Kelly Jacobs of Hernando, Miss., took it upon herself to travel around the Memphis area for 15 weeks, standing on a single street corner for a week at a time, to promote Dean. I saw a middle-aged man at a garden party in New Hampshire preface a question to Dean by saying he was associated with Howards for Howard. Dean nodded, as if the man had said he was with the AARP.

This national network of people communicates through, and takes inspiration from, the Dean Web log, or blog, where official campaign representatives post messages a few times a day and invite comments from the public. The unofficial campaign interacts daily with the campaign in other ways as well. When Jeff Horwitz, a full-time volunteer, needs help compiling the news articles that make up the staff's daily internal press briefing, he e-mails a request for help to a list of supporters he has never met, asking them to perform Internet news searches at certain times and then e-mail him the results. "Ten people will volunteer to give me a news summary by 8 a.m.," Horwitz explains. "People in California, which means they have to get up at 4 a.m." A number of campaign staffers are in regular contact with Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins, 14, who lives in Sitka, Alaska. Growing up on a remote Alaskan island, Kreiss-Tomkins has become especially adept at finding pen pals and online friends, and he now uses that skill on behalf of the Dean campaign, recruiting supporters through the Internet and then sending lists of e-mail addresses to the campaign.

Joe Trippi, Dean's campaign manager, says the campaign's structure is modeled on the Internet, which is organized as a grid, rather than as spokes surrounding a hub. Before joining the campaign, Trippi was on a four-year hiatus from politics, during which he consulted for high-tech companies, and he can be evangelical on the subject of the Internet and its potential to create political change. (A team of Internet theorists -- David Weinberger, Doc Searls, Howard Rheingold -- consults for the campaign.) Trippi likes to say that in the Internet model he has adopted for the campaign, the power lies with the people at "the edges of the network," rather than the center. When people from the unofficial campaign call and ask permission to undertake an activity on behalf of Dean, they are told they don't need permission.

The latest holy grail of the tech industry is the idea that people can fuse the virtual communities and digital connections of the Internet with real, human life. Investors are pouring money into Web sites and software programs that claim to perform this function, like Friendster, which lets users visually represent their real friend networks online, and Meetup.com, the site that has helped build the Dean campaign. Meetup.com takes its inspiration from books like "Bowling Alone," by Robert D. Putnam, about the decline of American public life; its founders claim that the regular monthly meetings arranged through its site (gathering any group from Wiccans to dachshund lovers to, more recently, supporters of political candidates) can help heal the disintegration of the American community.

Techies since the 70's have waxed utopian about the computer's potential to change the way we relate to one another and to restructure power dynamics. And Joe Trippi, a veteran of several losing presidential campaigns, has tried to build a grass-roots base before, most successfully for Jerry Brown. Although it remains to be seen
how significantly the Dean campaign can affect political participation, it has clearly shifted traditional party
time. Last January, the campaign had $157,000 in the bank and the open disdain of
of its party. In May, the Democratic Leadership Council's chairman and president described
McGovern-Mondale wing" of the party and publicly declared that he was detrimental to
Yogis, Howards, Dykes and Disney Employees for
the campaign built an alternative to institutions like the D.L.C. Dean has raised $25 million, mostly through
-- the average donation is $77 -- and those checks have placed Dean at the top of the Democratic
fund-raising pack.

Dean's opponents have begun to mimic the trappings of his campaign. Many of the Democratic candidates now
have blogs. Even President Bush has one, though comments from the public -- an essential element of Dean's blog
-- are not allowed. The Dean campaign tracks online contributions with the image of a baseball bat (at one point,
the Web site added a new bat for every $1 million raised); shortly after the Dean campaign raised its first million
dollars, John Kerry's campaign took up the Web icon of a hammer. But Dean's Internet campaign dwarfs those of
his rivals. In the third quarter of 2003, Kerry raised in the vicinity of $1 million online; Dean raised more than $7
million. A typical post on the Kerry blog receives, on average, 18 comments, while Dean blog posts generally
receive more than a hundred. The Dean Web site is visited with roughly the same frequency as the White House
Web site.

There seems to be something in Dean's personality that inspires this sort of response. Although his spontaneous,
unscripted manner has led some critics to label him as erratic, gaffe-prone and even mean-spirited, the young
people at the Dean offices often compare the former governor to a favorite uncle, and speak tenderly about his
frayed sweaters and raincoats. They think his jokes are funny. I watched one evening as Walker Waugh, a recent
graduate of Williams College, sat wrapped in a blanket in front of a bank of televisions at the Burlington
headquarters, laughing hysterically at footage of a 1993 Dean appearance on public access TV that he had been
assigned to catalog. "I'm sending this to all my boys," he said. "They'll love it."

Part of Dean's appeal is that he behaves in recognizably human ways. He talks with real emotion and seems to
respond to events (if sometimes poorly) as they come. In this election season, Dean's responsive, even angry,
voice has had political resonance. Many Dean supporters objected not just to the war in Iraq itself, but also to the
Bush administration's failure to even maintain the appearance of listening to the massive protests and U.N.
resolutions. By contrast, responsiveness is the essential sound of the Dean campaign. It is embodied not only in
Dean himself, but also in the blog, which creates the impression of a constant dialogue between supporters and
campaign staff, and in the organizing on the ground.

The campaign sees political involvement in the way "Bowling Alone" does, as related to participation in civic
organizations -- to people getting together socially. People at all levels of the Dean campaign will tell you that its
purpose is not just to elect Howard Dean president. Just as significant, they say, the point is to give people
something to believe in, and to connect those people to one another. The point is to get them out of their houses
and bring them together at barbecues, rallies and voting booths.

Dean supporters do not drive 200 miles through 10 inches of snow -- as John Crabtree, 39, and Craig Fleming, 41,
did to attend the November Dean meet-up in Fargo, N.D. -- to see a political candidate or a representative of his
staff. They drive that far to see each other.

I attended one meeting of a handful of Dean supporters in the basement of the public library in Hooksett, N.H. It
felt as much like a support group as a political rally. As they did at Clay Johnson's meet-up in Atlanta, everyone
went around the circle describing what drew them to Dean, usually in very personal language. Bob and Eileen
Ehlers haltingly explained the problems their children, in their 20's, have with health insurance, while Tony Evans
nodded sympathetically. No one was asked to volunteer at a phone bank, although people were asked to bring
their friends into the campaign.

After the meeting ended, everyone lingered in the library to talk. Greg DeMarco, a computer salesman, told me,
"My wife and I have met more people in Hooksett through the campaign than we have living here."
Eileen Ehlers agreed: "I don't know what it is -- maybe that the town has no sidewalks and no physical center, just strips, but people just don't talk to each other like we do here. People come to Hooksett to sleep, and go to work somewhere else. But the brilliance of the campaign is that it is leaving behind a community."

The official representative of the Dean campaign that night in Hooksett was Lauren Popper, a 24-year-old actress who temporarily left her boyfriend and career in New York City to work as an organizer for the Dean campaign in Manchester, N.H. She was motivated to volunteer for a weekend in part because she admired Dean's policy of having every new mother in Vermont visited by a state social worker, but she stayed for other reasons. Popper broke into tears several times while trying to explain what they were.

"The thought that he'll be president is a side effect," she said. "This campaign is about allowing people to come together and tell their life stories."

Howard Dean's campaign headquarters in Vermont are housed in the new breed of suburban structure typical of the landscape Eileen Ehlers described. The small, newly minted office building is poised where the brick-lined streets, bike shops and diners of Burlington end and the highway strip begins. Although the office is near Lake Champlain and leafy hills lurching toward winter, it could be anywhere.

The software that is supposed to bridge the gaps in the contemporary landscape is maintained here by three often-barefoot boys. They frequently work through the night, as piped-in soft rock fills the empty lobby. When you ask them how long they've been working, they respond in increments like "40 hours" or "three days, with naps."

During these spans of time spent in front of the computer, they may at any given point be coding software, corresponding with Internet theorists and venture capitalists or just firing off instant messages to one another that say, "Shut up."

When Clay Johnson drove to Burlington, it was to work in this cubicle. He now happily perches, for longer hours and for less money than he made in Atlanta, in front of two enormous monitors whose background image is a photo of Howard Dean opening his arms wide to a crowd.

Johnson works with Zack Rosen, 20, who organized a group of programmers to invent software to help the Dean campaign while on his summer vacation from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. After it was featured in Wired magazine, the Dean people recruited him to come to Burlington and work on it full time. The third man in the cubicle is Gray Brooks, 21, who has deferred his sophomore year at a small Southern Christian college to work for Dean.

The cubicle where Johnson, Rosen and Brooks work looks a lot like a dot-com start-up from the mid-90's: preternaturally pale-skinned young men, crazy hours and slightly messianic rhetoric. The men take turns sleeping in an easy chair with torn upholstery and appear to subsist almost entirely on donated food. A supporter sends over a peck of apples and cider doughnuts, and Brooks soon has seven apple cores piled by his desk; when Joe Trippi returns from dinner with a journalist, takeout containers of his half-eaten soup are deposited on Brooks's desk. Brooks augments this diet with pasta that he says he doesn't have time to cook. ("Try some," he says, holding out a piece of raw ziti. "If it had salt on it, you'd think it was a potato chip.")

Brooks, Johnson and Rosen are overseen, loosely, by Zephyr Teachout, 32, the campaign's director of Internet organizing. Teachout is a slight, freckled lawyer; she darts around the office in a pair of silver shoes with the balletic, boyish energy of Peter Pan. ("Have you seen how fast her hands move?" Rosen asks. "She'll click a mouse three times instead of once. I could watch her operate all day.") Because she runs Dean's Web effort, Teachout finds herself keeping company mostly with the 21-and-under set. She lives with Rachel, 18, an intern. She says that Tim Singer, 17, a volunteer who is still in high school, was "one of my best friends this summer" and that Michael Whitney, 19, one of the founders of Students for Dean, now known as Generation Dean, is "like a little soul mate." ("We even have the same haircut," she says, accurately, shaking her short shaggy hair out over her face.)

Teachout, sitting at the very edge of her seat, tells me that "the revolution," as she calls it, has three phases; the
first is Howard Dean himself, the second is Meetup.com and the third is the software that Rosen, Johnson and Brooks work with: Get Local, DeanLink, DeanSpace. "DeanSpace," Teachout says, "is the revolution."

Brooks oversees the Get Local tool. He drove from Alabama to Burlington at the beginning of last summer, after hearing Dean on the radio just once. He researched Dean's policies, and he liked them a lot. "But the strongest thing was that I could tell he is a good man," Brooks says gravely. "And if a good man were president, it would change everything in ways we can't even imagine."

Since he was 6, Brooks has been either a Cub Scout, a Boy Scout or an Eagle Scout -- he emphasizes that they are distinct institutions -- and he has the demeanor of a handsome, sturdy golden retriever puppy. When he rides his bicycle through Burlington's silent streets on his way home, he always notes the hushed face of the church he passes. Brooks doesn't have time to go to church right now, he says, and he doesn't expect to until Dean is in the White House. He misses church, and he misses his friends in Alabama, and he misses the paying summer job he gave up at Glacier National Park in Montana and the way the night sky looks there. But he knows he is doing the most important thing he could be doing. "Even when I am being lazy, it is important," he tells me, "because I am recharging my strength to work more for Howard Dean."

Get Local is a program that lets supporters organize local events independent of the campaign. The software allows supporters to contact one another and plan gatherings, as well as download fliers they can customize with phrases like "Dean, this spud's for you." Brooks monitors the efforts, making sure no one inserts bad words on campaign signs or organizes for nefarious purposes. He also composes missives to be fired off to Dean supporters' cellphones.

Teachout recruited Johnson to create DeanLink, a version of Friendster for the Dean campaign. On Friendster, users are able to see friends of friends up to four degrees of separation and read the comments their friends have written about them. DeanLink invites supporters to link to one another in the manner of Friendster -- "Introduce yourself! Make a new friend" -- and also to invite friends from outside the campaign to join. DeanLink lets supporters know one another as more than an e-mail address or a name on a mailing list; they can check out one another's photographs and interests online. They can also post flattering comments about other supporters, a move cribbed from Friendster's "testimonials." (Julie Reeve, Johnson's crush from Atlanta, for instance, writes on Johnson's DeanLink page that he is "fun to work with.") Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins has about 500 DeanLink pals.

Zack Rosen was a creator of DeanSpace, "the revolution itself." He started the project, originally called Hack for Dean, after reading about Dean on the campaign Web site for 20 minutes. "I just knew this is the guy," Rosen says. He recruited an unpaid team of nearly a hundred programmers, including his friends Neil and Ping, to write software for the campaign that would allow the many disparate, unofficial Dean Web sites to communicate directly with one another and also with the campaign. Typically, to reproduce information from one Web site to another, a user has to cut the information by hand and paste it into each Web site, a laborious process. The software that Zack's group built allows any Dean Web site to reprint another's stories, images and campaign feed automatically, as if they have a collective consciousness. It also will provide a "dashboard" for the people in Burlington, where the campaign can track patterns on its unofficial sites and observe which content is most popular.

The effect that Teachout says she hopes the software will create sounds like the experience of being in a tight-knit community: seeing people you know, responding to them, being acknowledged. Teachout speaks about these ideas as if she is reinventing the concept. She says that Meetup.com, is emerging as the "ritual" element of the new Dean community. "It's like church, the central place where people go to get inspired."

Teachout likes to "thesaurusize" words on the computer. Right now, she tells me, she is hard at work looking for a word to replace "citizen." "It would be a word to describe someone for whom politics is a part of their personal life and social life," she says. "I think I am going to ask the bloggers for suggestions."

It's not hard to imagine that if the year were 1999, Rosen, an ambitious college kid with an exciting new software
idea, could be easily recast in the role of child tycoon. But Rosen isn't mourning being born a few years too late. It
is not clear to him who owns the programs he invented -- the Democratic National Committee? Howard Dean? --
but he doesn't really care.

Rosen says the true purpose of the Internet is to allow people to connect, and he isn't surprised there wasn't money
to be made on that premise. Through his long fluorescent nights, Rosen takes breaks from coding to gaze happily
at the personal e-mail messages Dean supporters compose and send using Dean software. "Look," he says
wistfully, the light of the computer reflecting off of his glasses. "This is Nelson. He spent real time on this letter.
Look how long it is."

Rosen is one of the more diehard programmers at the Dean office. He can easily discourse for half an hour about
"open-source political campaigns" or the possibility of using cellphones to overthrow dictatorships or "recursive
hard core CS225 data structures." But he surprises me by saying he never would have come up with the Dean
software, or left school, if his first serious girlfriend (like Johnson's crush also named, coincidentally, Julie) hadn't
broken up with him last spring.

"The worst thing is we aren't even friends," he says glumly. "I invited her to be my friend" -- he gestures to his
computer monitor -- "I mean on Friendster. No word yet."

Behind Rosen, Johnson is peeking at pictures of his own Julie, Julie Reeve, posted on the Dean Web site. "She's
the 'A,' " he says giddily, looking at a group of Dean supporters spelling out D-E-A-N in front of CNN
headquarters.

In September, Johnson returned to Atlanta for a Generation Dean rally. "I cried when I got there and saw 1,000
people," he says, a huge leap from the 60 who came to the April meet-up. "The rally really showed people how
much they had underestimated Dean." It was a big day all around; scheduled speakers cancelled at the last minute,
and Johnson was asked to improvise onstage for nearly an hour about Governor Dean.

Shortly after Johnson's speech, he said that Merrill, his ex-girlfriend, approached him. "I told her, 'Merrill, I am
not in love with you anymore,' and turned and walked away," he says. Later that night, he kissed Julie Reeve for
the first time.

Brooks has a woman up on his screen, too. His desktop image, always lurking behind whatever project he's
working on, is a picture from a newspaper of a young woman alone on a train. She reminds him of a girl he
knows named Julia. "We wrote letters all summer," he says. "It kept me going, to get real mail, you know?"

Brooks's hard drive crashed this summer, taking with it his digital pictures of Julia, so he downloaded the photo of
the woman on the train. Above his desk, littered with the shells of hundreds of sunflower seeds (they came in
plastic bats, donated by a supporter), Brooks has taped a quote from Robert Louis Stevenson, which he recently
read into Julia's voice mail: "So long as we love we serve; so long as we are loved by others, I would almost say
that we are indispensable; and no man is useless while he has a friend."

Rosen, Johnson and Brooks work with headphones on. When they pluck them off or accidentally unplug them,
ballads bleed into the quiet office. "When the human touch is what I need, what I need is you," a computer wails
one night at 4 a.m. "Sometimes, when I look deep in your eyes, I swear I can see your soul," another computer
chimes in. Watching them work from their battered easy chair, I find it impossible to tell if they are gazing at the
filmy, pixilated image of a Julie or the face of a new Dean supporter or a line of code; whether the peer-to-peer
communication they are struggling with is related to the 2004 election and the fragmentation of American public
life, or is something more private.

In late October, Teachout decided to do an odd thing for a director of Internet organizing; she left the office to
tour around the country for six weeks (accompanied by 21-year-old Ryan Davis) in an Airstream bus. Her dream
was to meet the people whom she has been talking to every day on the telephone and over the Internet.
Teachout says she has been wanting to do something like this since March. "When I was falling in love with our grass roots," she says, "I thought, If I get fired, I am going to go on the road and meet all of them. Once the idea occurs to you, how can you resist?" Teachout says she would pore over pictures that people posted on the Web from Dean meet-ups, just "to get a sense of the characters involved."

I ask her if the people she hopes to meet on her trip are her friends.

"'Friend' is an odd word," she says slowly. "I mean, these are the people who populate my imagination." She mentions one blogger, a frequent poster from San Francisco. "Sally in SF," Teachout says, "is as much a part of my life as my sister."

She struggles for a better word than "friend" to describe the relationship -- she still hasn't found a replacement for "citizen" either -- and settles on "correspondent." "What's happening is an unusual and unprecedented correspondence between the campaign and us," she says. It takes me a moment before I realize that when she says "the campaign," she doesn't mean the people running the headquarters in Burlington. She means the people she's going to visit in her Airstream.

Samantha M. Shapiro last wrote for the magazine about settlers in Israel.