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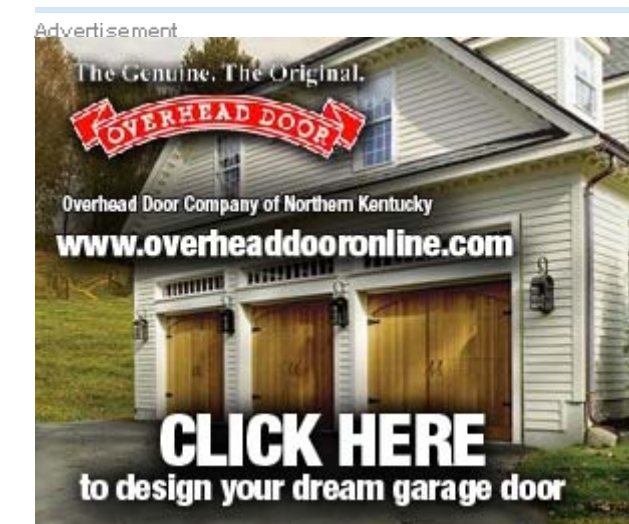
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County GOP chair puts energy into job Get-out-the-vote work in Campbell kept it red despite Dem numbers

By Patrick Crowley • pcrowley@nky.com • November 24, 2008

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NEWPORT - It was Labor Day, Monday, Sept. 1, and Jeff Kidwell was throwing a party.



Kidwell, 45, who seven months earlier had become chairman of the Campbell County GOP, had invited people to Longnecks Sports Grill in Wilder to watch the opening night of the Republican National Convention.

"The Democrats have always been better at socializing," Kidwell said in explaining why he helped organize the party. "I wanted to change that. We've always been good at organizing but I want to make this stuff enjoyable. That's how to get more people involved."

for the Gulf Coast.

But then Hurricane Gustav crashed the convention. Republicans decided to cancel the opening night's activities with the storm heading

Kidwell decided to still hold the Longneck's gathering. Though subdued, the party attracted about 30 Republicans.

The episode, while minor in the grand scheme of a presidential election year, showed Kidwell's commitment to his leadership role and the tenacity and success that he has brought to the party.

"Jeff has brought a new energy to the Campbell County GOP," said state Rep. Adam Koenig, R-Erlanger, who carried his two Campbell County precincts this year - Grants Lick and Claryville - with 62 percent of the vote in winning re-election over Democrat Merrick Krey.

"That took a lot of people but with the new volunteers, it got done," Koenig said.

Koenig wasn't the only Republican who ran well on Election Day in the county.

Presidential candidate John McCain, Sen. Mitch McConnell and Congressman Geoff Davis all received at least 60 percent of the vote in the county where Democrats outnumber Republicans 27,799 to 25,937.

McConnell and Davis won re-election; McCain carried Kentucky and won 57 of the county's 67 precincts, including every one south of Interstate 275, a growing area that includes Cold Spring and Alexandria.

Davis, known for his ability to turn out voters in his races, lauded this year's get-out-the-vote effort organized by Kidwell and party leaders and implemented by a small army of hundreds of volunteers. Davis called the effort the best in his 24-county 4th District this year as the Campbell County GOP, for the first time, visited voters in every precinct the last weekend before Election Day.

"The efforts and innovations by Chairman Kidwell and his team have been a true breath of fresh air in not just Campbell County, but the entire 4th District," said 4th District GOP Chairman Kevin Sell of Alexandria. "I am proud and pleased to see a true GOP work ethic applied to such a high degree."

Kidwell is quick to pass out the accolades to others, including former chairwoman Barb Haas; Pete Garrett, the party's secretary; Amy Towles, the daughter of Sen. Jim Bunning of Southgate; and volunteers like Louise Zetterberg, Rick Schulzens and Tony and Elaine Henderson.

Zetterberg recently underwent hip-replacement surgery, but still walked a precinct.

Schulzens, assigned a precinct where addresses have recently changed, spent hours cross-referencing voter lists with the phone book to make sure he was going to the right houses.

The Hendersons regularly called voters from their home.

"We get the credit for getting these people together," Kidwell said of the party's leadership. "But they get the credit for doing the work."

Candidates say Kidwell's energy, organization and technical skills - he owns and operates Star Computers in Newport - attracted new volunteers to the party, which translated to votes on Election Day.

A longtime party official, Kidwell took over as chairman in March. He immediately began calling Republicans, asking them if they were interested in getting involved in the party.

He then began to build a database of volunteers, including their phone numbers and e-mails, that he tapped as the party began gearing up for the final election push in the fall.

Campaign signs are coveted in presidential election years. But Kidwell wouldn't hand out signs for McCain and Sarah Palin without getting names and contact information of those requesting.

Eventually, Kidwell had a database of 600 volunteers that could easily be contacted through an e-mail blast.

As Election Day neared, Kidwell set up a phone bank at his computer shop. In the final days phone banks were also set up at Penderly Insurance in Fort Thomas, owned by the family of Campbell County Judge-executive Steve Penderly, and at a private residence in Fort Thomas.

Walking lists were assembled and assigned.

On the final weekend, hundreds of volunteers hit the streets to knock on doors and hand out literature. When darkness fell, they hit the phone banks and worked into the night.

The party hit 96 percent of the voters it targeted.

"We were pulling volunteers in with several different ways," Kidwell said. "And we still are. We're only just beginning. This next year is going to be all about building up our network of volunteers and raising money."

Kidwell and the party are already gearing up for 2010, when countywide courthouse seats will be contested. Kidwell said the GOP would likely field candidates for every office it doesn't hold.

"Campbell County has been seen as the last holdout of the Democratic Party in Northern Kentucky," he said. "We're changing that. I'm intending this to be the new Boone County, where you just don't see Democrats run much less win."

That could be a tall order.

While Republicans did have success on Election Day this year, the total votes for the Democratic presidential ticket rose from 2004. Meanwhile, the number of votes for McCain was slightly less than the total cast four years ago for George W. Bush.

Democrats also control several key courthouse positions, including two county commission seats and the offices of sheriff, county clerk, commonwealth's attorney and county attorney.

"Democrats are still strong in this county," said state Rep. Dennis Keene, a Wilder Democrat who the Republicans gave a pass to this year by not fielding a candidate. "They couldn't find anybody to run against me and even if they find people to run for some of these county offices, they'll lose because they are now held by experienced Democrats who are doing a good job."

But Wilder Police Chief Tony Rouse, a Republican who plans to run for sheriff in two years, said he has been encouraged by Kidwell's leadership and energy.

"Jeff has done so much since he's taken over," Rouse said. "He's a really good organizer, he knows the technical aspect and he knows how to get people involved. We saw what he could do this year. He'll have a big impact on our races in 2010."

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