

PURPLE

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four other people from across the country through a process of surveys and interviews – none of them journalists, politicians or political experts – and asked them to be witness to the 2008 presidential primaries.

“Tanya has been great,” Farrar said. “She came in as kind of an understudy... She came in later than the others, didn’t know them, and fit right in.”

Along the way they would be filmed, and the video posted on the internet (purplestates.tv.com). The New York Times also put its stamp of approval on the project, lending the team of “citizen journalists” considerable access to the candidates.

“I kind of paid attention to who was running, but I never really discussed politics with anyone before,” said Tamara Briggam, a 33-year-old stay-at-home mom from Hopkins, S.C., who also participated in the project. Her husband, who is self employed, cared for their three children while she traveled around the country interviewing most of the major candidates.

“My kids were very excited about this,” she said. “They asked me a lot of questions about politics. So I think it was a good thing, because now they realize regular people can do things like this.”

Many of the participants’ videos may also be seen on *The New York Times* website. Segments have also been aired on local and national television.

“To sum it up, we have been to New Hampshire, South Carolina and Iowa to see the candidates at rallies, caucuses, press conferences, et cetera,” Amador-Daigle said.

“We were at the Republican Debate last night. We have been interviewing candidates, campaign managers, wives of candidates, celebrities and ordinary people on the street. We will be in Miami reporting at rallies and debates for the primaries next weekend.”

Last weekend she was in Texas at the Democratic Party debate. Amador-Daigle has appeared behind the scenes of Fox Spin Zone in South Carolina. She spoke with Mike Huckabee’s wife, Janet, who defended her husband against Fred Thompson’s allegations that he was not conservative enough. She met and interviewed Senators John McCain, Hillary Clinton, John Edwards and Former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani. She liked Giuliani less in person than McCain.

“You get a vibe,” she said.

Cameras from Public Television’s McNeil/Lehrer Productions followed her wherever she went.

“We took a page out of the reality TV playbook,” Farrar said.

This was all new to Amador-Daigle, outside not only her area of expertise (she sold real estate before managing the art gallery), but also any previous personal experiences.

“I have my job, I work,” she said. “I haven’t been involved in politics up to this.”

As people across the nation discovered the Purple State’s website, their feedback began to mingle with the participants’ running blog, creating a cross-country political discourse. The process of electing a president, as seen through the eyes of these citizen journalists, was becoming less remote to “average, ordinary” people. It was no longer, as Farrar said, “some obscure exotic activity that’s carried out by consenting adults in places like Washington.”

That probably happened in 1984, when NBC’s David Brinkley called a map showing Reagan’s 49-state landslide a “sea of blue.” And it happened again in 2006 when the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee picked up on the red/blue color scheme, by then adopted by most major news networks, and decided to launch a national “Red



The discussion turns to politics on a recent evening in downtown Fort Myers.

FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO



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Citizen-journalist Tanya Amador-Daigle is covering the 2008 presidential primaries for www.purplestates.tv.com

to Blue Program.”

Purple States made the cartoonish red/blue designations real, she said, or at least gave them greater dimensions.

“We need the professional journalist, and what they do is really important,” Farrar said. “What citizen journalists add, though, is the news from a very different set of concerns, concerns that are much closer to the ground. It’s not just about an individual person out there – there are lots of citizen journalist websites. Ours is a systematic attempt to see what’s going on in the campaigning and politics more generally, through a citizen filter.”

Currently, Farrar is discussing the possibility of producing a documentary with television networks, based on the footage. And the project won’t end with the primary elections.

“We expect starting next January to cover the policy making process after the elections,” she said, “focusing on particular issues and looking at how campaign promises get translated into law or don’t.”

Although Amador-Daigle and the other participants had different political views and backgrounds, discussions remained respectful, and the group, especially the three women, became “tight-knit,” she said.

“If you look at the five citizen journalists, we all came from very diverse backgrounds, and we all got along very well in each other’s company,” said participant Bert Sobanik, a 50-year-old Home Inspector from Maine with no political affiliation, who just lost his job. “My background is entirely in working with my hands. I guess working in construction I was deemed to be a ‘regular-enough person’ to add some diversity to this discussion.”

The other citizen journalists are Alex

Ritchie, 54, a Procurement Specialist for AT&T from Cypress, Calif., and Elizabeth Gotsdiner, 23, a florist from Clive, Iowa.

Briggman said, “I really feel like we’ve made lifetime friends.”

Purple states in downtown Fort Myers

On a Thursday night at dusk a group of friends stood together outside Needful Things, a tattoo parlor on Main Street. They were located somewhere off in the vast purple area between red and blue, far from any “obscure, exotic activity being carried out by consenting adults in Washington.” Here, the mood towards the current presidential election was at turns discouraged, alienated and curious.

“I don’t think our vote really makes a difference,” Chrystal Janssen, 22, said. “When I think of politics I think of getting a choice between the worst of all evils.”

“I don’t know what the difference between Democrats and Republicans is,” her friend Aimee Robare, 24, admitted. “...I guess I’m a communist.”

Lacy Hinkle, 23, offered another view: “I think people alienate themselves from politics,” as did Andrew Shipley, 27, who quipped, “If Ross Perot is running, I’d vote for him.”

Down the street from the tattoo parlor, night had turned the sky dark blue above Main Street Antiques, where a Thursday evening group browsed the vintage clothing line or sat outside drinking Merlot and eating pizza.

“It’s really your local politics where you feel like you can do the most,” Tara Daltry, 26, said.

Czech Republic native Misa Prazsky, 35, said national politicians are worlds away.

“I was born and raised in a Communist country and I feel like I had more control over there than I’ve ever had here,” he said. “Here, no one listens to you. Here, they really don’t seem to care about the people as much. The politicians have their own venue.”

There was a brief, but heated, discussion about the merits of Bill Clinton’s presidency versus the current administration’s, which ended amiably. Then someone posed a question that suggested a yearning for history to save us from an uncertain future: If you could pick any past president to be back in office, who would it be?

“I like (Franklin D. Roosevelt),” Daltry said. “He got us through a really rough time and he made all these job

welfare organizations. Now it’s like all those programs have become a joke... And that’s because of all the bureaucracy.”

Downtown Fort Myers resident Jenna Satterfield, 52, agreed with Daltry.

“I don’t think most politicians really know what the average American citizen is going through,” she said. “I don’t think they know what people working in retail, working at the gas stations, in the little corner shops, are going through. They just don’t walk in the same circles we do. They talk a good game, but they’re not there.”

One woman had nothing to say about national politics.

“But let’s talk about parking downtown and I’ll give you a quote,” she said.

Around the corner at The Indigo Room, Al Kinkle, Jr., 33, who manages a residential and commercial real estate franchise, enjoyed a cocktail. “Life’s Been Good,” by Joe Walsh, one of Kinkle’s favorite songs, began playing.

“We’ve come a long way in our country’s political system,” Kinkle said. “However, it’s 2008 and we still only have, really, a two-party system, which really isn’t representative of all the issues. In the same way that most people would agree there are two sides to every story and the truth lies somewhere in the middle, it’s the same with the political system.”

“I think we’re still living according to the viewpoints that our parents and grandparents had, so we’re basically living 20, 30, 50 years in the past and until we recognize that, as a nation, we won’t be ready for an independent movement that can move two parties together.”

The concept of Purple States was popularized by Robert J. Vanderbie, a Princeton University Professor in the School of Engineering and Applied Science, by creating a “Purple America” map depicting the absence of overwhelming victories in the 2000 election, in most counties across the nation.

That history-making map was only intended to be an exercise for the freshman computer-programming course that he sometimes teaches, Vanderbie claims. But it was reprinted in *US News and World Report* before the 2004 election. Soon after, it raced through the “blogosphere,” becoming a way of saying the United States isn’t as politically divided as many believe.

“I think this election is going to change the history of politics and change the direction of the country,” Amador-Daigle said. “I feel like I’ve been really lucky to have the experience.” ■