

ELECTION

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designed to raise money and gather voters, they say.

So we asked them some simple questions: What are you doing these days to promote your candidate, and why should we vote for him, or her?

The conversations were casual and quick, by phone and in person, and good-natured.

Bruce Strayhorn, 55, a downtown lawyer whose family of cattle ranchers and lawyers or judges dates back generations here (he still runs cows), champions Sen. Hillary Clinton, and knows her, celebrating what he describes as her toughness, her experience, her clear positions on many issues, and her compassion.

Will Prather, owner of the Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre -- along with two other theaters out west -- was born and raised on the Susquehanna River, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. At 39, he's an ardent proponent of change, of moving away from longtime political leaders like Clinton and McCain, and embracing instead the youth and optimism that Sen. Barack Obama exemplifies, he says. Like Strayhorn, he's spent time in his candidate's company, too.

And Gary Lee, the executive director of the Republican Party of Lee County, is a 75-year-old career public servant and Republican politician from upstate New York -- Ithaca -- who served in a variety of offices over the course of many years, including in the New York State legislature, before retiring to Lee County. He admires Sen. John McCain's honesty, his tenacity and courage, and his wide experience, not only in the world and in war, but in the U.S. Congress, where he can "cross party lines to achieve a goal," Lee says.

The comments of each man appear below.

All three agree on at least one fact: that even though Florida's Democrats were maneuvered out of a chance to choose a candidate, and the Independents have no choice to begin with and can't vote in primaries here, come November both will play a major role in the outcome.

Floridians of any political stripe will be a force to deal with, pundits say, because Sunshine Staters are once again likely to prove a prominent factor in deciding the election, as they did previously, first when George W. Bush defeated Al Gore in 2000, and then when he defeated John Kerry four years ago.

Here's why: Florida is the fourth-largest voting state in the nation, wielding a heavyweight's 27 Electoral College votes, which is exactly 10 percent of the 270 needed to win the general election. (California has 55, Texas has 34, and New York has 31 seats in the Electoral College, where seats are awarded for each U.S. Senator and Representative from each state. Any state must have a minimum of 3 seats, or votes).

Ostensibly the state is Democratic, with 4.2 million registered Democrats, a muscular 400,000-count edge over the state's 3.8 million registered Republicans. But lying between those two committed (or opinionated) political parties are the Independents. And they number a huge 2.2 million.

The candidate who wins the most popular votes in Florida, even if he or she wins by a single vote, takes all 27 votes in the Electoral College (Only in Nebraska and Maine is it done differently).

So far, therefore, Democratic candidates have not been seen in southwest Florida, but John McCain has visited the area (focusing on Naples) about six times.

The object for all of them is money, at this point. In McCain's case, says Gary Lee, he's raising it himself from the Republican-rich region.



Sen. Hillary Clinton with Lee County chief fundraiser Attorney Bruce Strayhorn.

In the cases of Clinton and Obama, both are relying on their point men, Strayhorn and Prather, to make money while the sun shines.

And from here in the heart of the political country, those dollars and the decisions of volunteer politicians could potentially affect the lives of all Americans for years to come.

The Hillary Clinton Campaign: Bruce Strayhorn

“When Sen. Clinton announced, we decided our goal would be for every contributor possible to contribute the maximum amount then, not only for the primary but for the general, to get it all done at once with a \$4,600 check — \$2,300 for the primary, and \$2,300 for the general election, which is what the law allows.

“We probably raised \$150,000 or \$200,000 in a two- or three-county area.

“The general election money is frozen, she can't use it until the general.

“What we had after Pennsylvania was a need, and a plea for money. So she and I and deputy chairs from the 50 states got together for a conference call, and we raised about \$10 million in 24 hours.

“In recent days, I average about 10 calls a day from people who want to contribute.

“Many go online at hillaryclinton.com, and I talk to people from Naples to Bonita to Hendry and Glades who know I'm attached to the campaign. A lot of them aren't rich, but they want to contribute \$100 or something.”

“For those who say the Democratic Party is defeating itself, I can only point out that Democrats love to have full and open debate. They don't stifle debate. And as Sen. Clinton says, the American people deserve a discussion of the issues going on now.

“In healthcare, there is a difference between her and Sen. Obama, and I won't even mention McCain. Their economic stimulus packages are different. The Republicans would prefer to keep the issues sub rosa — to talk about who Rev. Wright dinged, or what Bill said, but let's don't get into this nasty stuff about affordable housing or health care.

“So the Democrats aren't self-destructing, they're fostering democracy, an old Greek word which I think meant a little more than what happens in smoke-filled back rooms.”

“Haywood Sullivan used to walk in a room, and the entire place would be captured by his aura. He never had to open his mouth or say a word. Sure he was big and he owned the Boston Red Sox, but if you didn't know who he was, it didn't make any difference.

“When Sen. Clinton walks in the room, there's the same immediate aura and excitement. And I'd only put her at about 5-feet, 5-inches or so.

“There's an automatic linkage between her and everyone there. And there are almost never any political platitudes from her. In every issue her grasp of details is formidable.

“And she'll do the right thing. One evening she was supposed to come down here (to political ally and artist Robert Rauschenberg's home) to raise money, which she needed, and a big vote came up the same night over Bush's giving away of American ports to Dubai. So she said, ‘Bruce, you make the choice, should I fly down or stay for this vote?’ She stayed, of course.

“When you see her swig back a beer — that's the candidate I know. She's been putting in 16 to 18-hour days in Indiana and North Carolina, and she doesn't even look tired.

“No wonder the steelworkers (a union chief in Indiana) gave her a ‘testicular fortitude’ award. That respect for toughness isn't what you'd naturally expect them to give a woman, but there's a reason.

“There are many reasons to vote for her, going way back. Immediately after her graduation from Wellesley College she worked for the Children's Defense Fund, and for affordable housing. She's always been where the rubber hits the road, for the people.

“In Florida, she has fought battles together with Sen. Nelson for Everglades restoration. When I mention Lake Okeechobee to her, rather than say, ‘What's that?’ she'll say, ‘that last bill we passed authorized over the President's veto some extra help.’ So we don't have trite conversation.



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO ROGER WILLIAMS
Gary Lee, executive director of Republicans of Lee County.

“She's faced down inequity and gender discrimination, and she has tremendous experience.

“Okay, maybe she didn't sign the bills her husband did as president, but even he will admit that she was on every topic right into discussions, and unlike our current president, could tell you the details about all of them.

“She has compassion. She has — I hate to be gender biased — she has motherly compassion. But she's tough, she doesn't always tear up. She has compassion for the guy or the girl who got overlooked.

“So that's why I always kid Will Prather — I tell him we'll leave the light on for him.”

The John McCain Campaign: Gary Lee

“What they're focusing on now, when Sen. McCain blitzes through here from time to time, is

Do Re Mi.

“Our planning and organization is in process, but not finalized. In the last few weeks we've had a representative from the Republican Party of Florida here, looking at potential office sites, which we did for Gov. Crist in 2006. We'll be opening in the near future, in Cape Coral, in South Fort Myers, in Estero, and Bonita Springs.

“In theory we should be organized, but in reality, with a national or gubernatorial campaign, there's a propensity to overlook the grass roots, and coordination falls through the cracks.

“So I've asked the executive director of the Republican party of Florida to come in here on May 17, and join our county committee to have a workshop and overview of what are we planning in 2008 for the presidential campaign.

“What are the mailings going to say, are we looking for door to doors, are there going to be automatic telephone calls?

“I've also invited the Republican leadership from Collier, Hendry, Charlotte, and Sarasota Counties.”

“The McCain-Feingold legislation, ironically, is very restrictive. If a local or state party is going to participate in a federal candidacy, such as a House race or the presidency, you have to set up a special federal account for raising money, if you choose that, and there are very stringent rules for opening an account.

“So most counties have chosen not to open federal accounts, and expose themselves to that kind of vulnerability, especially since this is a part-time job with no pay. So it's totally up to McCain's campaign, how they raise and spend money.”

“The first criteria for me in choosing McCain is this: He has proven and tested leadership skills, both in combat in the military, and from years in service in the House of Representatives and the Senate. He's been exposed to all kinds of trials and tribulations.

“It's time to think of the Republic. And sadly, the Congress of the US is paralyzed in its current or recent state by enormous partisanship. As a result, problems confronting the US, both domestically and internationally, are begging for solutions.

“On the domestic side, whether it's energy or education or a major revision of infrastructure, or on the international scene, trying to resolve radicals, and recognizing the prominent need for more contributions by other countries in the world, I think John McCain brings a unique bipartisanship record and dimension that will serve our Republic well.

“So, reaching across the spectrum of moderate Republicans and Independents, and a fair share of Democrats, may be just what the doctor ordered.