

# Student's first-hand lesson in politics

By Evan Hanford

James Booth saw what was happening in the United States and knew he had to be a part of it. Mr Booth, 21, is an economics/law student at the Australian National University. He has been working as a volunteer for the past two months with the Obama campaign. He is currently helping out in Arlington, Virginia, after spending several weeks enrolling voters in Detroit.

"I was just watching it in Australia, and I thought it would be amazing to be involved," he said, over the phone from the campaign office.

"There were a couple of hurdles. I didn't know anyone involved in the campaign. I was just talking to people in Australia, and then I booked a flight, and just made it happen. I didn't have much money in the bank. I flew into Chicago and knocked on the door of the campaign headquarters, and gave them the spiel, told them I was available 24 hours a day anywhere in the country."

The Obama campaign initially put him to work in Detroit, and he also spent short periods in Ohio and Pennsylvania, before settling in Arlington, where he has been for the better part of a month.

Lyndon Johnson was the last Democrat presidential candidate to win Virginia, 44 years ago.

But the state is increasingly being touted as the equivalent of Florida in 2000 or Ohio in 2004, and the Obama campaign has duly focused a good deal of its resources there.

Mr Booth's office is one of more than 50 in operation in the state, where nearly a third of voters are registered as independent.

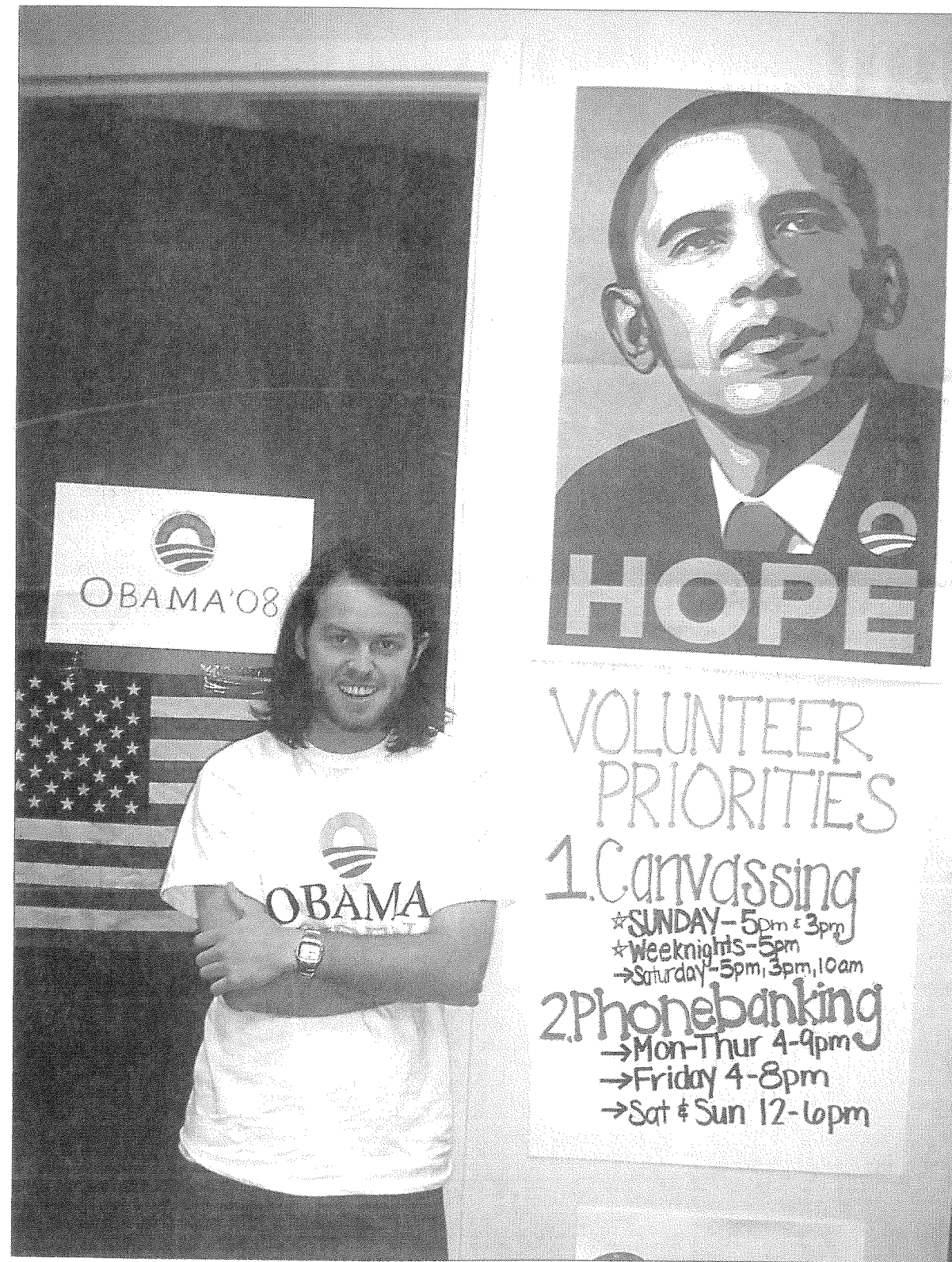
Virginia was the first state to elect an African-American governor, L. Douglas Wilder, in 1989. It has a population of just over seven million.

One of the more remarkable aspects of the Obama campaign has been the way in which it has been organised and run.

Mr Booth characterises this as the "top down, bottom up" principle. He said, "there are really two main elements [to it]. There's the technological coordination, which with modern database techniques and the internet means we can easily coordinate hundreds of thousands of volunteers, as well as identifying every single voter in the US."

"That's what's called the 'top down', which is there to facilitate the 'bottom up'. That's the grassroots part of it, the door-to-door and the telephone. [The campaign's use of technology] makes this part much, much easier."

"What you see is the top down efficiency, the professionalism. What you don't notice [from the outside], though, is the extent to which it is a grassroots campaign, powered by volunteer man hours. It's an extraordinary confluence of volunteers, that you don't necessarily see in Australian



COMMITTED: ANU student James Booth flew to the US to assist the Obama campaign in the run-up to the Presidential election.

politics." He said the feeling among campaign workers was like that of a family.

His office is presided over by a handful of full-time staff, but there will be "hundreds" of volunteers passing through during the day. Mr Booth said his "district" is responsible for 40,000 to 50,000 votes.

There is a strong work ethic among

the campaign staff. Phone canvassing usually begins at about 11 am, and continues through until 9 pm. From 5 pm on weekdays, canvassers will go door-to-door.

It is not uncommon for canvassers to visit the same houses several times, but Mr Booth said his Australian accent was a good ice-breaker.

The task of the campaign is not

only to get people to vote for Senator Obama. It is also to persuade people to vote at all.

"Getting out the vote is a huge aspect," he says. "It's probably not something that people in Australia are familiar with."

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