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At home with the PPL in Charlotte

The grassroots and the establishment create a media workspace at the convention

By Andria Krewson



North Carolina

CHARLOTTE — On the top floor of Packard Place, a 1920s-era building five blocks from the site of the Democratic convention that has been reinvented as a hub for entrepreneurs, Politico set up its Charlotte home. There were shiny lounges, a small set for video programming, and two bars, fully stocked. It was a fitting encampment for a well-capitalized media outlet covering one of our foremost political rituals.

Down one flight, the scene was different: old round tables and folding chairs, power outlets chained together, a local coffee bar, a covered table holding homemade brownies and cookies, and a motley crew of **independent journalists**, **cause-oriented media**, and **nonprofit groups with media sites**. This was the newsroom of the PPL (pronounced “people”), a project launched more than a year ago by young Charlotteans Matt Tyndall, Justin Ruckman, and Desiree Kane. Their goal: To create a platform and space to amplify the grassroots voices of Charlotte, not to mention those that flocked here from around the country for the Democratic convention.

The result was an interesting mix of lefty activism, establishment support, and journalists from different points along the professional spectrum. The PPL is in many ways the descendant of The Big Tent, a home for bloggers created with support from the progressive coalition Netroots Nation at the 2008 Democratic convention in Denver. (Mark Washburn of *The Charlotte Observer* offered a **good succinct history** of conventions and bloggers in a June story about the PPL.) Netroots teamed up with the PPL in June, folding the Big Tent **into the local operation**, and plenty of left-leaning media and activist types gathered here, paying fees as low as \$45 for access to the workspace, free coffee and informal happy hours, along with panels that tackled topics like government support for startups and black women’s perspectives on politics and policy.

But the project also found broad-based community support in Charlotte. Tyndall, Ruckman, and Kane—all of whom are new-media professionals and key players in **CLTBlog**, a Charlotte platform for citizens voices—pitched their vision to the local Chamber of Commerce last fall, using the same bridge-building philosophy that they brought to conversations with the local Occupy group. The **Charlotte Arts & Science Council** signed on as the fiscal agent for the PPL and helped to secure funding from the Knight Foundation to hire a project manager, who happens to be the former campaign manager for the city’s Democratic mayor. Michael Solender, an editor for a local nonprofit web magazine, was one of many in the community who offered important assistance with logistics, publicity, and outreach, and signed on as an advisory board member. It didn’t hurt that, as Solender wrote to me in an email last week, “There is a ‘cool kids’ aura about” the trio of talented organizers, “and who doesn’t want to affiliate with the cool kids?”

Starting from scratch, the plan morphed several times, but always with a focus on amplifying new media voices. It also kept a focus on the non-partisan—or perhaps multi-partisan—approach that the original organizers had emphasized, a goal reflected in the purple lighting for the PPL’s panelist stage. The result of all these different influences was an **attendees page** that lists left-leaning media outlets old and new; various Democratic standard-bearers and interest groups (the Senate campaign of New York’s Kirsten Gillibrand, the state AFL-CIO); commercial sponsors of the webby (UStream), politically connected (Covington & Burling), and local variety; and an assortment of other small-scale, independent, and even right-leaning journalists, like the folks from the Franklin Center’s Watchdog Wire. In an interview last Saturday, Bruce Clark, the project manager, said the point was to be a platform for many voices, rather than a mouthpiece for one cause or another. “It’s almost impossible to co-opt us because we are just a platform,” he said. (CJR is on the attendees list, too; I paid the registration fee so I could have access to the workspace and also to make it easier to report this story.)

It was also intriguing to see how many representatives of the traditional Charlotte media cropped up in the PPL’s newsroom. Working among bloggers were Frank Barrows, a former managing editor of *The Charlotte Observer*; Mary Newsom, a longtime editorial board member of the *Observer* now with the University of North Carolina at Charlotte; Craig Paddock, a communications professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and Becky Kuhn, a retired regional editor at the *Observer*. They shared space and conversation with new voices like James Stewart of **Detailed Block**; Jenifer Daniels of Charlotte, who presented the “Ask A Sista” panel

for Netroots; and Grant Baldwin, a local freelance photographer who has been [documenting the Occupy protesters](#) and covered the convention for several media outlets. (Along with Vancouver-based photographer Kris Krug, Baldwin also documented the PPL's efforts; their images are Creative Commons-licensed and [posted on Flickr](#).)

Alongside that emphasis on openness was an effort to change the narrative of politics from one of negativity to one focusing on positive change. "We even changed the titles of our panels to be solutions-oriented," said Ruckman. In the same spirit of optimism, both the PPL and Netroots were focused on creating a "safe place" for different types of people in an environment where the streets can seem crowded and confrontational. A 7-year-old blogger for the Girl Scouts came through the PPL on Wednesday with her mom and siblings, one in a stroller. On Tuesday, a group of activists stopped by to use the space to organize posters decorated with cannabis leaves.

I spent a lot of time in the PPL newsroom during the week too, even with a house nearby and credentials that gave me access to the official media space in the Charlotte Convention Center. At the convention center, the wi-fi cut in and out and the hordes of media made one feel like one cow in the herd. The wi-fi sometimes slowed at the PPL newsroom too, and distractions mounted as the convention came to a full roar. But chance encounters made up for the chaos. Chris Kromm of the Institute for Southern Studies came by at one point, and I got to watch UNC's [Daniel Kreiss](#) at work, studying the influence of new voices in politics. And I had moments to chat with former colleagues I hadn't seen in years. Support for the PPL spanned generations.

Grant Baldwin, the local photographer, told me that the project provided a place to connect with people passionate about their crafts, and to pass along opportunities to others. And a [tweet](#) from Generation Engage in Charlotte, a group that encourages youth civic involvement, captured the PPL's potential as a hub of networking and learning. "HS student reporting on #dnc2012 says she learned more at @ppldnc this wk than in any sch semester," it said.

With the DNC over, one of the trio of founders is moving on: Ruckman's new wife is working on her doctorate in Atlanta, though he stuck around in Charlotte for the convention. In an interview before the big week, he said the plan is to leave [PPL site](#) online, serving as a blueprint for those who want to create any similar projects. The group [Flickr pool](#) will stay up too, of course, documenting the culmination—and, maybe, the beginning—of a remarkable community effort.

Andria Krewson is an independent journalist in Charlotte and a student in the University of North Carolina's master of arts in technology and digital communication. She worked at *The Charlotte Observer* for many years. Find her on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/underoak> or <http://twitter.com/akrewson>.