

04:00 PM - September 4, 2012

Off-kicked Charlotte kicks off right

Swing State Project's NC correspondent considers the view of her home city from the inside and out

By Andria Krewson



CHARLOTTE — This wasn't the plan.

North Carolina Just about ten weeks ago, the Democratic National Convention organizers still planned to kick off in Charlotte with a Labor Day party for the public at the Charlotte Motor Speedway, which is really in Concord, about 30 miles up the road.

But organizers **pivoted** in late June, and convention festivities opened yesterday in “uptown” Charlotte, within a strict security zone, right at the city’s historic square at Trade and Tryon streets, and just a block or so from massive security lockdowns around the convention-hosting Bobcats Arena. The, **ahem**, “**most open and accessible convention in history**” commenced with Charlotte as the distinct backdrop.

The uptown event felt risky. Would people stay home, fearing potential hordes of protesters and uncertain security? People came—some 30,000—and protesters were “subdued and far outnumbered,” **reported** the *Charlotte Business Journal*. The Labor Day community party worked.

Tryon Street filled with families, delegates, media and, yes, tons of police on Monday, sweating and mingling with vendors of funnel cakes and political buttons. North Carolina native son James Taylor squeezed in a couple of songs at a stage at the square at Trade and Tryon before the usual afternoon downpour forced the crowds out of the center city.

Uptown Charlotte **looked** yesterday as it did during the Springfest festivals of the late 1980s when I was new in town and Harvey Gantt was the city’s first black mayor. Perhaps that’s no mistake. This convention feels very much like Gantt’s event, perhaps an ultimate comeback from another campaign long ago, when he lost his bid for US senator to Jesse Helms, after the infamous “**hands**” ad.

For many locals who love Charlotte (including me), yesterday’s event felt good. National media have taken this convention as a chance to write about Charlotte, and sometimes their images seem narrow and out of date. Reporters **lose credibility** among the locals as they get small facts or language just wrong. (Charlotte’s been overshadowed by Greensboro? Bless the New York *Daily News*’s heart—but, no.)

Politico **called** my hometown airport “dank and dreary”—it has a sun-filled center **with rocking chairs**—as it asked, “Can Charlotte Cut It?”

Judging by Monday’s kickoff, yes, we can.

Even our protesting—the largest planned protest, the March on Wall Street South, was on Sunday— **has thus far been** generally civil, diverse and colorful. The *Washington Post* **wrote up** Sunday’s march with a savvy, almost-bored tone. But for Charlotte residents—with our neighbors either marching or working as security—a safe, civil march carried a certain importance. (Late Monday night, about 100 protesters **marched again** through Charlotte’s uptown streets, accompanied by a large contingent of police officers, many on bikes. So this story isn’t over yet.)

But, back to the broader convention.

This party in Charlotte isn’t just former mayor Gantt’s, of course. Many others have a hand in it and in its perceived success. Former mayor Richard Vinroot, a Republican friend of Gantt’s, has joined Gantt’s efforts in promoting Charlotte as a host city and in framing the city’s image amid the national scrutiny. In a forum ahead of the convention last week—with no national media and with just one local reporter for a small online magazine present—Vinroot and Gantt explained why Charlotte’s story helped it snag a national convention. They also paid tribute to Susan Burgess, a former city council member who died before her vision of landing the convention became reality.

“We are as good as we say we are, and that’s not boosterism—we back it up,” said Vinroot, [quoted](#) by Michael Solender in Charlotte Viewpoint.

During a social media breakfast last month, Desiree Kane, a local organizer of the nonpartisan blogger hub [the PPL](#), sounded a similarly pro-Charlotte note.

“Our candidate is Charlotte,” said Kane.

Long-time North Carolina political journalist and University of North Carolina journalism professor [Ferrel Guillory](#) has embraced the convention as an opportunity to go deep on North Carolina’s culture and politics, teaming up with newcomers like [Daniel Kreiss](#) (an assistant journalism professor at UNC Chapel Hill) to educate and explain Southern politics and campaigning to the media, students and the public in roundtables at [The Charlotte Observer](#) and [at thePPL](#). ([Here’s a replay](#) of the *Observer* event.)

On Friday, Saturday and Monday, Tom Hanchett, a historian and unabashed booster of the diverse flavors of the South, [organized tours](#) for the convention-bound media at Charlotte’s Museum of the New South, giving visitors a taste of the “stories behind Charlotte’s emergence as a major city”—and of our sweet local soda flavors, from Cheerwine to Sangria Señorial.

Hanchett told the tale of how Charlotte avoided violence during the early days of racial integration in the 1960s, when local African American dentist Reginald Hawkins met with Mayor Stan Brookshire to urge action on integrating restaurants.

“Charlotte was really tense about how the outside media would see them,” Hanchett said, as all eyes focused on violence in Alabama. Mayor Brookshire, said Hanchett, said, “We ain’t gonna do that. We’re a business town.”

Brookshire then visited the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce and recommended that all the white guys take a black guy to lunch at the fancy uptown restaurants of the day that hadn’t integrated, Hanchett said.

That narrative, that idea of civic cooperation and pride, is part of Charlotte’s self-image, across the political spectrum. *Charlotte Observer* reporter Elizabeth Leland, as part of a package leading up to the convention, [detailed](#) Charlotte’s longstanding think-I-can outlook in a piece headlined “Little City That Could”—quoting a UNC Charlotte historian. (Leland now [has](#) West Nile virus, but that’s another story.)

Cooperation and resolve to overcome obstacles economic and otherwise don’t often make headlines, but when the ideas work, as they did Monday during the convention kickoff party, it makes locals proud. Even I, as a skeptical journalist and a long-time resident, have come to sometimes doubt that vision of success for the city during the hungry years in town. The images and feel of uptown Charlotte on Monday helped renew some faith.

But again, the story isn’t over. As Hanchett said during one of his media briefings, “We’re busy reinventing ourselves right now.” Perhaps that’s a story the national—and regional—media can examine more closely.

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>.