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COMMENTARY

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Volunteer Culture

An army of about 10,000 volunteers will make sure things run smoothly during the 2004 Democratic National Convention.

by Margaret Weigel

(July-14-2004)



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Whether you plan to drive, fly, park, or take public transportation, the forecast in Boston for the week of July 24-31, 2004 is for 99 percent gridlock, with no relief in sight. The storm cloud that is the 2004 Democratic National Convention (DNC) is descending on the city and residents are voting with their feet, electing to take vacation time at the request of beleaguered employers.

But while Bostonians flee the city en masse during convention week, a ragtag army plans to rush in, heading right for the Fleet Center and various locations through the city. They are the nearly [10,000 proud, unpaid, and \(hopefully\) polite volunteers](#) of the 2004 Democratic National Convention who seek to unseat George W. Bush from the White House. Traffic tie-ups and terror threats shall not keep these volunteers from

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their appointed rounds.

You might think that it was difficult to fill thousands of unpaid convention positions, but the Boston 2004 volunteer management organization was so inundated with volunteers that it ended up turning hopefuls away. On July 10, 2004, nearly 8,000 approved volunteers convened at Boston's Hynes Convention Center to pick up assignment packets, participate in hospitality training, get free T-shirts, and share why they want to work at the convention.

While about 25 percent of the volunteers live in Boston proper, many hail from the suburbs and beyond, including other states and even other countries. Among those attending the training session were Cathyann Sweeney and her son, residents of Red Hill, PA, a small town 40 miles outside Philadelphia. The younger Sweeney was filming footage of the training for The Upper Perkiomen Democratic Club, where the elder Sweeney acts as webmaster.

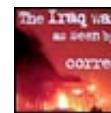
One volunteer from Rhode Island proudly reported that she was a state delegate for McGovern at the 1972 Democratic Convention in Miami at the tender age of 28. When asked about the possible threat of terrorism at this year's Convention, she responded, as did most other volunteers, that she was not worried. "You know what? If it happens, it happens. Europe has been dealing with this for years already. We are very isolated and very fortunate that way." More than anything, she was annoyed by the string of conveniently-timed, too-vague but still-unsettling terror threats, a sentiment echoed by most volunteers.



Claire Helfand
[View more photos](#)

While the volunteers generally support Democratic candidate John Kerry, they are uniformly united in their dislike of the current Commander-in-Chief's policies. [Karin](#) traveled a long way from her home in Holland to work at the DNC. She will spend the next six weeks volunteering in different capacities, at check-in desks and hospitality parties across the city. "I am here because of George W. Bush," she said sternly.

[Claire Helfand](#) from Hollis, New Hampshire cut a stunning figure decked out in a straw boater, a red, white and blue T-shirt and a myriad of political pins. She has been active in politics since 1962. She remembers how she ran out from nursing school one day to see JFK pass by. When asked why she is volunteering for the



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DNC, Helfand didn't hesitate to share her dissatisfaction with the current American President. "I'm here because this country can't afford another four years of Bush, and when I say afford I mean financially, he's bankrupting us, emotionally he's bankrupting us, worldwide and internationally he's bankrupting us."

[John Hines](#), a disabled Vietnam veteran from Bradford, MA, decided to volunteer because of the [2000 national elections](#). "I was disappointed by the process," admitted the lifelong Democrat, "and by the person who got in, of course." In his current work with veterans, Hines sees young soldiers returning from the war in Iraq. "They are so young," he sighed, "and some of them have injuries that are going to last them a lifetime."



Vietnam vet John Hines
[View more photos](#)

Like John, many volunteers were inspired to participate in the DNC because of the 2000 election and its aftermath. Others are excited to have such a major political event held in their own backyard, and still others volunteered to help the beleaguered Democratic Party. [Lynette](#), a volunteer with the convention's Special Teams staff, was born in Trinidad

but has lived primarily in Cambridge, MA for the last thirty years. This is Lynette's first presidential election since she became an American citizen four years ago. "It's great to be an American," she said. "It affords its citizens a voice. Unfortunately, lots of people don't use that voice." Is she worried about a possible terror strike at the convention? "Well, I admit it crossed my mind but I believe in God, and I pray," she smiled.

The volunteers I met were unfailingly smiling, friendly, and polite, but one wonders if Boston's reputation for rudeness, mixed with a heaping helping of Bush-bashing, might lend a cold, boorish tone to the convention experience. Boston Mayor Thomas Menino took to the stage to exhort the volunteers to be nice: "You're the first contact with [the delegates]...The information that you give them will tell them what kind of visit they'll have. That's why it's so important to listen to the training sessions."

The hospitality training sessions, six in all to accommodate the sheer volume of volunteers and run by Dale Carnegie's corporate trainers, were elementary lessons in projecting warmth and friendliness when dealing with visitors. In one exercise, volunteers were required to first shake hands with their neighbors in the session, and then shake hands again, this time pretending their neighbors were long-lost friends. "Now,

which one was more enthusiastic?" the meeting facilitator asked. "I saw some of you hugging; you don't have to go *that* far!" she chortled.

Inspiring a Bostonian to hug a stranger is a noteworthy accomplishment. And the DNC can rest easy that the volunteers for the 2004 convention are serious about sticking around town. As [Shirley Frawley](#), a volunteer 'Beantown Buddy' from Lexington, MA put it, "I want to be a part of it. I'm not afraid. I want to run into the center of things, not run *from* them."

Margaret Weigel writes for WBUR Arts Online, the online arts magazine of WBUR, Boston's NPR News station.

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