

## Bluegrass-Roots Effort Wins a Visit From Edwards

Jose Antonio Vargas

Washington Post Staff Writer

Friday, October 5, 2007; Page A04

COLUMBUS, Ky., Oct. 4 -- No one in this tiny, remote town -- population 229 -- can remember the last time a presidential candidate stopped by during a campaign.

But there was John Edwards on Thursday afternoon, holding court at a historic park on the banks of the Mississippi River. At least 1,500 people showed up for the appearance in this town so small it does not have a traffic light, with hundreds from neighboring towns taking part. Local schools, including nearby Hickman County High, took part of the day off and delivered busloads of students to the park.

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the full rules governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

As unlikely as it seems, this event in the heart of rural America was the result of online grass-roots organizing -- on the part of Edwards and his supporters -- on Eventful (<http://www.eventful.com>), where users can demand that musicians, comedians and, in recent months, presidential candidates visit their home towns.

Early in the summer, Edwards, who has lagged Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton (N.Y.) and Barack Obama (Ill.) in polls testing the race for the Democratic nomination, announced that he would come to whichever city demanded him most on Eventful. Shawn Dixon, born and raised in Columbus, took up the challenge, signing up for the site and launching a virtual lobbying campaign, sending e-mails, writing on blogs and contacting his friends on Facebook and MySpace. In the end Columbus bested cities such as Los Angeles, Dallas and Seattle, with votes from 1,870 Eventful users.

On Eventful, Dixon, 24, described his town by writing: "Columbus, Kentucky is a small town in Western Kentucky that boasts a population of 229 people and is about a 50-minute drive from the closest McDonald's. Like many rural communities across the south, job loss in the face of rising healthcare costs and education costs have crippled the economy."

Dixon introduced Edwards to the crowd on Thursday, saying: "This event is really more about the idea of Columbus than about Columbus. Columbus represents the tens of millions of people in rural America who are consistently ignored and left out in the national political dialogue."

Added Edwards in an interview Thursday: "This is the beauty of the Net. It's bringing new people in, allowing folks who feel like they don't have a voice to speak up in whatever way they want."

The Internet has played an increasingly vital role in the primary season, and new Web-based efforts are launched almost daily. On Thursday, MySpace and PayPal teamed up to make it easier for candidates to collect money through their MySpace pages, and Obama created profiles on BlackPlanet.com, MiGente.com and AsianAve.com, popular social networking sites in the black, Latino and Asian communities.

So far this campaign season, Obama, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), Rep. Dennis J. Kucinich (D-Ohio), Rep. Ron Paul (R-Tex.) and former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee (R) have used Eventful to plan appearances. Edwards, in fact, is not even the most demanded candidate on Eventful; Paul and Obama share that distinction.

But Edwards's hour-and-a-half stop at Columbus-Belmont State Park underscored yet another impact of the Web: In a primary being fought as much online as offline, supporters outside the early-voting states of Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina are demanding a say in the process.

Like many states without an early primary, Kentucky has not seen a lot of the presidential candidates this year. Democrats will not vote here until May, which is likely to be months after the nominations have been decided. The Bluegrass State is made up of 120 counties, and one of its smallest is Hickman, home to Columbus, a close-knit community where everyone goes to the same supermarket (Greg's, off Highway 51) and reads the same weekly newspaper (the Hickman County Gazette, with the top headline in this edition reading "Columbus Prepares for Edwards' Visit"). President Bush won 60 percent of the vote in Hickman County in 2004, but its residents describe themselves as "conservative Democrats."

"We're not believers in a great big government that rules everyone's lives, but we believe that government ought to be as efficient as it can and serve the needs of a wide range of people," said Greg Pruitt, 48, a Democrat and the county's top elected official.

The concerns of rural America, Pruitt said, are not necessarily in line with those of the rest of the country. Though the war in Iraq is a big issue, what's bigger in the minds of most residents is the dismal economy. The aftershocks of the North American Free Trade Agreement can still be felt, with empty industrial facilities symbolizing jobs lost to Mexico and China.

And like in most rural communities, limited access to the kind of broadband Internet connection that brought Edwards here is a big issue.

ConnectKentucky, a partnership of the state and private tech firms, is working to bring high-speed Internet access to all Kentuckians. But providing access does not mean people will subscribe. Pruitt estimates that 70 percent of Hickman County has access to the Internet available through cable and satellite systems, but only about 40 percent of residents actually have it at home.

According to a recent study by the Washington-based Wireless Communications Association International, the trade association for the broadband wireless industry, only six of the 17 presidential candidates have announced broadband policies. "Many of them talk about the need

for broadband in rural areas," said Andrew Kreig, president of the association. "But the devil is in the details, and very few have outlined specific plans."

Broadband access was one of the topics, along with health care, global warming and terrorism, mentioned in Edwards's town-hall-style event here Thursday. The candidate reiterated his anti-poverty crusade and reminded voters that he grew up in a town much like Columbus. Edwards, however, was not the only man of the hour. Dixon, the son of factory workers, was, too.

Said Columbus resident Lee Jackson, the park's maintenance supervisor and an Eventful voter, "If it wasn't for Shawn, who represented us on the Internet, Edwards wouldn't be here today."

# # #