MRLF celebrates work of Labor 2018 field staff

By Steve Share, Labor Review editor

MINNEAPOLIS — Two days after the November 2018 election, the Minneapolis Regional Labor Federation, AFL-CIO celebrated the work of the crew of field staff whose outreach to union members helped make so many wins happen, including electing Tim Walz as governor and electing a labor-friendly majority in the Minnesota House of Representatives.

“We won some really big victories we should feel really good about,” said David Gilbert-Pederson, MRLF organizer.

“These wins would not have been possible without your work,” he told the November 8 gathering of field staff workers and their guests. “We have some people in office now that can help make progress for workers.”

The MRLF’s Labor 2018 field staff — who numbered as many as 40 people during the height of the campaign — were a diverse group. They included current union members who took a leave of absence from their jobs to work on the campaign, union retirees, and community activists who hired on to work with labor on the campaign. And they included people who had worked as construction workers, service workers, public employees, and teachers.

Their job as field staff: doorknocking to visit the homes of union members and to engage them in a conversation about the issues of the 2018 election. In a new approach from past years, the field staff talked about issues first, not candidates. And they shared their own personal story about how being a union member made a difference in their own life. Most importantly, they asked the person at the door, “how about you? What are the issues do you care about? How has being a union member made a difference in your life or in the life of your family?”

These conversations involved “much more listening,” than in past elections’ field work, noted Casey Hudek, MRLF campaigns manager.

The result? “We engaged with union members who maybe we lost in the 2016 election, he said.

Meet some of the people whose work as MRLF Labor 2018 field staff helped make the year’s election wins possible. 

Jean Marie Sell-Baudhuin: Laborers Local 563 member

Late on election day, Jean Marie Sell-Baudhuin was still out doorknocking in Shakopee. “It was raining. It was snowing. But I said ‘every vote counts,’” said Sell-Baudhuin, Lakeville, who was in her third election cycle taking a leave from her job to do election work with the MRLF.

Even so, in the middle of the campaign, Sell-Baudhuin went back to work for three weeks, 10-14 hours a day, to work on a turn-around at the Flint Hills refinery. And then she came back to the MRLF field staff to knock on doors. “I love doing this,” she said. 

Stan Green: Transit Workers Local 1005 member

Green, Coon Rapids, is a 25-year member of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1005 and a Metro Transit bus mechanic who took a 12-week leave from his job to join the Labor 2018 field staff.

Part of the field staff’s work is to recruit union members to volunteer for special doorknocking and phonebanking events. “We started off slow,” Green reported. “It was very difficult for us to get volunteers.” But, he added, “we just buckled down. Everybody did more work — and we pulled it off!”

With the campaign over, he added, “I get to be home in the evenings now!”

Maria Ocampo: UNITE HERE Local 17 member

Not everyone with the MRLF Labor 2018 field staff was an old hand at political work. Maria Ocampo, Minneapolis, is a 7-year member of UNITE HERE Local 17 who works as a housekeeper at the Marriott Courtyard hotel. She spent about two months working with the MRLF’s Labor 2018 effort, focusing on reaching out to Spanish-speaking union members.

“This was my first time. I was scared,” she acknowledged. “You talk politics and some people get mad.”

But, she said, she overcame her fears to do the work of doorknocking and making phone calls. “I need to help Spanish-speaking families,” she said. “I like to help other people.”

Now that the campaign is over, she said, “I’m happy. The winner, Tim Walz, looks nice for the families.”

Would she do political work with the MRLF again? She didn’t hesitate in answering. “Yes. I liked it — because I changed lives.”

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Max Graves: SEIU Healthcare Minnesota member

“If we all get out and vote together, we can make something happen,” said Max Graves, Brooklyn Park, who worked for about six months with the MRLF field staff. Graves is a home healthcare worker and member of SEIU Healthcare Minnesota.

He likes doorknocking, he said, because “it’s a chance to actually engage people. You can’t speculate their state of mind.”

He added, “a lot of us agree on similar issues but a lot of us are culturally illiterate to each other.” Only by talking more, can people learn to better communicate with and better understand someone from a different background.

Graves talked with voters about races ranging from Governor to U.S. Congress to Osseo school board.

“You can’t win them all,” he said. “You just wish you had a little more time... You see the effects of your doorknocking.” All in all, Graves said, “we kicked ass at the polls.”

Dee Ann Christensen: Education Minnesota member

“I love doorknocking,” said Dee Ann Christensen, Coon Rapids. She values the social connection. She’s a retired high school social studies teacher, a member of Anoka Hennepin Education Minnesota. “I’ve been working in the northern suburbs for a long time.”

Christensen was part of the MRLF’s field staff in 2016 and came back for 2018. “I tried to listen more this time,” she reported. “I know I can convince people by first listening... Find core values and then persuade them.”

Rick Caron: IBEW Local 292 member

“This was big this time, a very important election,” said Rick Caron, Columbia Heights, a 41-year member of IBEW Local 292 who retired two years ago. While he said he had done some doorknocking in the past, “I’m not really an outgoing person, especially if I don’t know people,” he disclosed. “You’ve got to be driven to want to do this kind of stuff.”

“You’ve got to stand up for what you believe in,” Caron said, explaining why he became involved with the MRLF’s Labor 2018 field staff.

Caron said he’ll be back, especially because 2020 will be a presidential election year. “We’re only half-way there — the larger battle is ahead of us.”

John Hall: Community member

“My grandpa was a union guy. He was a U.S. soldier,” said John Hall, Minneapolis. Although Hall is not a union member himself, “I’m a local community organizer on social justice issues,” he explained. “I’m a Jewish Community Action member.” He came on board with the MRLF field staff early in September.

“It was my very first political campaign,” Hall said, adding “I felt I had a good background to talk with people about why it was important to vote.”

Hall now is hooked. “Every year, four to six months of the year, I’m going to do this again so we can get candidates that represent the people who need to be represented,” he said.

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