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Event
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Hitting the Campaign Trail

2008

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Not long ago, I sat down with a couple of friends to discuss photography, and we stumbled onto an interesting topic: Who would you most like to photograph?

For me, it was an easy call—I had been tuning in to the hotly contested presidential race for some time now. I had become pretty fascinated with following all of the dramatic twists and turns, documented so differently in old and new media and passionately discussed at parties and gatherings. I wanted to photograph my candidate of choice, primarily, but I also wanted to document this living history, this exceptional experience of nominating a “first ever” for a general election candidate.

That discussion got me thinking. As a photographer who has been shooting weddings, portraits and editorial work nonstop for the past five-plus years, I was feeling some great security with my studio and my schedule, but I was itching to stretch outside of what I knew, to bring a bit of adventure into the mix.

So I had a goal. But how to make it happen?

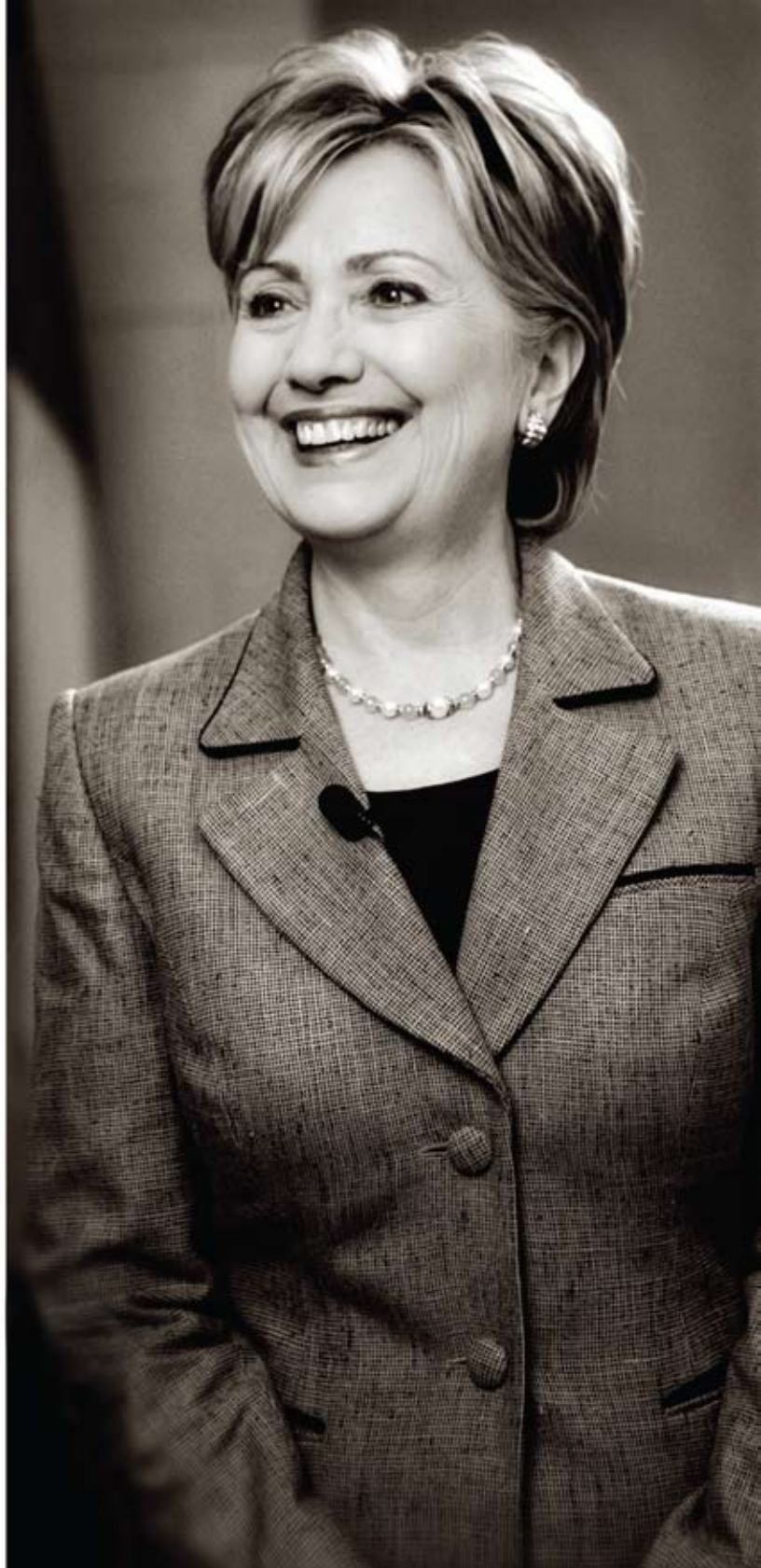
One of my editorial assignments is to act as director of



photography for a regional lifestyle and fitness magazine in the Southeast. Given the magazine’s core focus, I suggested we do a piece on how fitness and lifestyle tie directly into two of the campaign’s biggest issues—healthcare and the economy. Running the story in advance of the May primary in North Carolina, a coveted state for voter turnout, made for some pretty excellent timing.

I wasn’t exactly sure how to get the ball rolling, so I just started talking to friends, neighbors and clients about what I wanted to do. It turned out that many of them were more connected than I knew. Within a few days, one of my clients shared some information she’d just learned—Barack Obama was visiting North Carolina in two days. I contacted the campaign, signed up for press credentials, cleared my schedule and booked the last night available at a nearby hotel.

At the town hall meeting, I showed up early so I could get through security in enough time to get a feel for what the press area was like and to find whomever I’d need to speak to about getting better access. It was a revelation to learn that I wasn’t nearly





as green as I thought I might be at working in a press capacity.

It turns out that after enough wedding and portrait work, we photographers are well prepared to shoot nearly anything. We can react to dramatic lighting shifts on the fly, we work with people in high stress mode, and we know how to position ourselves in any room to make a terrible setting shine as background to our subjects. I would argue that if we are already used to shooting in a less scripted way, striving to create new experiences for our clients' fulfillment (and our own), then we are already used to trying to manage the tenuous balance between throwing away the playbook and exceeding our clients' expectations. Basically, we know more than we know.

I was able to gain access to "the buffer," a five-foot border around the candidate that press members



waddle in and out of to capture cleaner images of their subjects. It's kind of like photographing the exchange of vows from the altar, but there's a plastic wall behind you and your subjects to separate you from the guests.

This particular town hall meeting was also a big media event, and it was fun to snag a few portraits of Andersen Cooper, traveling to cover his own story for CNN. An even bigger highlight, though, was gradually becoming aware that I was photographing shoulder to shoulder with Annie Leibovitz. It was a heady, albeit oddly slow, realization. Suddenly I didn't know who exactly to focus my lens on, as my fellow photographer was now as exciting to me as the subject on record. I imagine it's similar to finishing a serious bike tour when, rounding the last bend, you realize you've been cycling next to Lance



Armstrong. Yeah, you still have your end goal in mind, but wouldn't it be nice to initiate some dialogue with your new friend Lance?

As I was checking out Annie's red and black Nike Airs (and deciding I would be donning more comfortable footwear to weddings from that inspired moment on), I saw her step behind the black cur-

tain we were positioned against. I waited a few moments and then followed the same path, which led directly towards the spot where Senator Barack Obama would be exiting. It was a prime spot to shoot his departure, and I loved the view I got with the lights behind him, flanked by security, shaking hands on his way out. I also learned I wasn't supposed to be

standing at that particular spot.

An agent of the Secret Service is a lot like a wedding director, and similarly, looking away as they approach does nothing to actually halt their advance. You're still about to have a problem. The big difference, of course, is that most wedding directors I have met aren't carrying a gun.

In response to the hissed question, "How did you get here?" I went with the truth: "I just walked behind the curtain and came out on the other side." Apparently, as I learned, you need Secret Service clearance to go behind the curtain. Good to know.

Afterwards, I was lucky enough to photograph Obama again at a private fundraiser, somehow winding up directly in front of him as he spoke to a crowd of about 150 or so. The overall look and feel of the event was so different, and it was remarkable to get such unfettered close-ups.

Early the next morning, my Blackberry pinged receipt of my first new message, an unsolicited invite from the Clinton campaign to cover President Bill Clinton's visit to Cary, NC, scheduled for just 36 hours later. Apparently I had made it onto some media list.

This experience was quite different—instead of a town hall meeting with thousands, the former president was speaking to 300 people at a senior center. But even though there was a maximum capacity in the building, throngs of people stood outside hoping just to catch a glimpse of him as he left.

After posting images from those shoots on my blog, something even more interesting happened. I received a phone call from a client. She explained that her mom had been following my blog since I'd photographed her grandchildren a couple of years earlier. As it turns out, she is not only a passionate supporter of Hillary Clinton, but also a close friend, and she wanted to see how she could get me the type of access I would need to achieve more personal images of the Senator.

Within 24 hours, there were a flurry of emails exchanged between her and Clinton's campaign manager and press secretary. Nothing was firmly decided about what kind of access I would get, but things were looking quite good going into her visit to North Carolina the very next day.

At the event, we found ourselves in a large room packed with supporters and a full press crew from near and far. Unfor-

unately, the electronic needs of the individuals in the room threatened to exceed the electronic capabilities of the facility. The lights were set rather low, cell phone coverage was dropping with the wind, and there was a quickly spreading rumor that the building might lose power altogether if one more outlet was employed.

I had received several calls from a staffer traveling with Senator Clinton's campaign, but I couldn't sustain a call long enough to actually hear what she was saying. Luckily, I finally identified her just as the Senator's speech was coming to a close, and it was decided that I would get some time alone with the candidate. I wound up with 12 minutes to photograph the Senator, between interviews, not an insignificant

amount of time on a day where she was giving three speeches in three different cities across the state.

Next, Michelle Obama came to town and was met by the largest crowd she had ever spoken to, nearly 6000 people.

Things were getting easier—I received press invites from two different sources prior to the event and showed up to find fabulous lighting and the ability to shoot from all the locations I requested.

Nearly one month to the day after I first photographed Senator Obama, he returned to North Carolina. Our cover story was already going to press, but I had shared my blog posts with the campaign, and they offered me an opportunity to work directly for them.

So I ended up traveling with the campaign throughout North Carolina, photographing Senator Obama as he made his way through a closed-door fundraiser, a town hall meeting, a rally, several three-minute press meetings, and another private fundraiser, just before stepping on to a live feed for *The Colbert Report*.

And I finally got my Secret Service clearance!

One of the more bizarre moments involved checking my Blackberry between events and seeing a headline on Yahoo! News with a quote Obama had delivered only moments ago. The story expanded a few hours later, now with detail from his second speech in another town. Talk about real time. I was compelled to scan the

media tables to see if I could discover who, specifically, was posting the news that was getting picked up so rapidly.

At the end of the evening, I had photographed hundreds of images of the Senator on just one of his many busy days, not just editorial coverage but more formal poses of him alongside individuals important to the campaign. As many images I had were of him looking directly into the camera, I was still hoping for that one standalone single portrait of him, the one that showed what I wanted to portray of him—a prospect that had eluded me up until that particular moment.

And then, finally, unexpectedly, an opportunity surfaced, and those last clicks after a month-long quest brought me back full circle to that discussion I'd had with my fellow photographers not six weeks prior—Who would you most like to photograph? ✍️

Tamara Lackey loves the high energy mix of working with gifted associates in her North Carolina studio, shooting editorial assignments, and speaking at seminars and workshops throughout the country. With work in 30-plus publications, including Vogue, O Magazine, Elle, and Martha Stewart Living, her new book releases in the Fall 2008 (Amherst Media).

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