

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And, I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: When we go to cast our vote, it's the poll workers who guide us through the process. And in today's divisive political climate, poll workers are subject to more pressures than ever. In our last episode, we heard from a Florida poll worker about her early voting experiences. With us today is Harriet Edwards, a poll worker in Orange County, California to take us through what Election Day was like for her. Harriet, welcome to the podcast. Thanks for joining us.

HE: Greetings!

VC: Greetings back at you. I understand this is the first time you're doing this. Is that right?

HE: Correct.

VC: And what made you decide to do this in the first place?

HE: Well, I've been politically active and also very interested in supporting people in voting all my life. But this time in particular there was so much discussion about poll workers possibly being intimidated so that they were having trouble recruiting poll workers and so I thought, okay, I've been shying away from this because the hours I knew were very long. And I didn't want to work all day and into the night. But this time I decided, you know, I may be needed. And so I called them up and I volunteered. However, they actually don't let you volunteer. I actually will be paid very nicely, so here I am doing it for the first time.

VC: Great, and just out of curiosity, what do they pay you?

HE: Ah, \$20.71 an hour plus overtime if in the week-long period you work more than 40 hours, which I did. And you're paid for your training time.

KK: Oh, that's what I wanted to ask you. Did your training, help you with the experience of early voting?

VC: And for the big, election day?

HE: It really did. For us at least, as poll workers, it's kind of like putting on a play and you are both the stage crew and the cast. So, you come into an empty room and you get all of your equipment, you set that out, you set it up and you open everything up and in the evenings you close things down, secure everything, in the mornings you open it up, do a bunch of security checks and then the voters come in and you're dealing with the voters. The thing that in some sense they can never prepare you for is if you have an absolute mob scene with voters out the door.

VC: And did you?

HE: Yes, we did. On Election Day. Other than the actual process of dealing with the voters, of processing the voters, and so on, was the same. So, there was no change from early voting to election day and it went straight through so early voting started for us on Saturday. We went Saturday, Sunday, Monday which was officially early voting. Then we did election day but there was really no change. There are apparently vote centers that are open for 11 days for the election. But I didn't work any of those.

KK: Did you have any of those so-called poll-watchers outside during this time?

HE: There was one fellow who apparently has been an observer for years, so our lead for our team knew of him and knew him and he was perfectly nice. He just came in and stood around and watched us set up and he was no problem at all. We had nobody hanging around outside snarling, or anything like that that I know of. On election day it rained like crazy so that probably would have kept them out of our hair because they have to be out there, certainly outside. We were located in the student union on the Cal State Fullerton campus which is a huge campus and we had quite a nice, large room and a hallway outside so that when people did have to line up and wait on election day, they were indoors which was nice.

KK: Were the poll-watchers allowed to come into the indoor...

HE: Yes. They could come into the vote center.

KK: So, it sounds like they didn't threaten you or harass you guys...

HE: We had absolutely no nonsense. We had one woman who complained about the fact that the buses were on strike even though they had resumed service for the few days before the election and she went out the door, going "Trump, Trump Trump!" (VC/KK: Oh, no!!) That was it. That was the only electioneering that occurred. So, it was very easy and people were very nice, and very patient waiting in line, thanked us a lot for what we were doing. Mostly thinking we were volunteers, so "Thank you for doing this, thank you for volunteering." If we had a moment, I'd say, "Well actually, we get paid, which is nice.

VC: So, you mentioned that people were lining up, so how was the turnout. Big turnout in your polling place?

HE: Big turnout on election day. Since we were on a university campus Saturday and Sunday were pretty much a snooze fest. We had several of us sitting there waiting to process voters and when a voter came in, we were sort of like, Me, me, me... (laughter). On Monday when the students came back on the campus it picked up a little bit. On Tuesday it was like, OK, all the procrastinators came out from under the woodwork, or whatever rocks they were under and came on in. And it was kind of interesting because we have, being a university campus, and a commuter campus, we have a lot of people from the surrounding counties. We're very close to Riverside, San Bernardino, and LA County. And then we have people coming down from the Bay area and so on, and so people were turning in mail-in ballots. On election day we had mail-in ballots from 24 different counties. (VC Wow) What we also had were students who came in and were out-of-county voters. They kind of had some choices. They could if they had a residence on Orange County, living in the dorms even, or living locally, we could essentially re-register them in Orange County and then they vote provisionally. There's just a lot more paperwork connected with that. So that was part of what made it a complete zoo was that we not only had the people who were your normal voters that you could process and get ballots to very quickly. The provisional voters took more time.

VC: So, you mentioned that you had drop boxes.

HE: It wasn't officially a drop box. The drop boxes, and they were all over the county, they kind of look like mailboxes, good strong steel boxes with a slot like a mailbox. That's in fact where I dropped my ballot off. But you can also just take your mail-in ballot to a vote center and just turn it in. And so we had this huge ballot box that was oh, a good maybe five feet long, two feet wide, three feet across, slot on the top where you could drop the ballots in. And we had so many mail-in ballots and the provisional ballots to be dropped in there, they would pile up underneath the slot, you kind of had to shake the ballot box to make room and I was making jokes about, I never thought I would grow up to find myself stuffing a ballot box!

KK: Was there security around this ballot box?

HE: The ballot box itself is inside the voting center and actually when people come to drop off their ballot they can't put it in the ballot box. We tell them, come on along, watch me drop it in, I would go over to the ballot box and say kafunk, now you voted. Actually, you don't tend to have very visible security, at least in California, right around the polling places because the presence of security guards or cops can itself be intimidating to the voters. So, basically if you have any problems, you give a holler to the registrar of voters and they call the cops. That happened at a different place and these three huge cops showed up to talk to someone who was electioneering.

VC: But you didn't have any incidents of that nature in your place. So, our Florida poll worker said that there are different positions in her polling place and they rotate every two hours. Did you have a similar setup in your place, or how did that work?

HE: We play different roles. So, you have somebody who manages the line, if there is a line and so for a number of times I would go up and down the line and I would ask, "does anybody have a mail-in ballot? If you do just come on in, you can drop it off." Is everybody registered? If you're registered, are you registered in Orange County? So, we could start getting the provisional voting paperwork going for them so it didn't take as long once they got in. You had somebody at the head of the line who would direct them... now this, of course, was when you had a lot of people. When it was very quiet, they just sort of wandered in and we'd pounce on them. But you had somebody who was directing the line and directing them to the various check-in stations. We had four people who were running the tablets and the way it works in Orange County—and this is why you could do it county-wide rather than precinct by precinct. You find somebody in the electronic poll book, find their name and address and so on, that gives you their precinct number. What that allows you to do is then connect to a printer which prints out the ballot which is correct for their precinct. So, you get ballots from different precincts all over the county. So, you were still asking me about the roles. There was somebody who would direct people to the voting booths. And that became important when it got very crowded. I was joking that it was like going into the ladies' room and finding which booths are empty by looking at the legs (VC/KK-Laughter, yeah, right!) and then you tell them, you can go there, you can go there. So, again just directing people so things run smoothly. And then there's a person who sits over by the scanners so you mark your ballot and then you go over to the machine that scans your ballot and then drops your ballot into the ballot box so that you have both the electronic record and then you actually have the physical, paper ballot. So, everybody votes on a paper ballot.

VC: And did you rotate these positions? Or did everybody have a set thing that they did, how did that work?

HE: We did rotate at some point sometimes. People sort of settled into roles because for example our lead was very good with checking in and we had four people at these tables with the printers and so on but we also had a remote tablet where she could go down the line and work a number of people in the line, check them in, and what that actually, there's a step that I didn't mention which is after you check in you actually print what's called a ballot receipt and that has the bar code on it that is then read by the printer to print out your ballot. So, she would go down and line and be able to check people in and give them their ballot receipt so that when they went up to the table all they had to do was hand in their ballot receipt, we would scan it and they would have their ballot. So, that was another... and she was very good with that. She'd done it before. And so, we were just trying to get people through as quickly as possible

KK: Sounds like you were able to do it.

HE: Yeah. We got pretty good at it; we had a lot of practice.

KK: I'm curious, how many hours a day were you...

HE: Let's see... For the three early voting days we were there at 7:30 because the polls opened at 8. The polls closed at 8 and then there's a whole shutdown routine which also involves taking all of the ballots, the printed ballots, the mail-in ballots, the provisional ballots and various other items, you put them in this big blue bag and you're sort of like Santa Claus, sling it over your shoulder, take it out to your car and it's kind of interesting. You put it in the trunk and you have another person who follows you so that there are two of you driving to the ballot drop-off point. And I think more than anything else that's just in case the person who's got the ballots, their car breaks down (VC/KK: Aha!). They didn't tell us that, that's my speculation. I'm guessing. And in our case, it was literally around the corner. So, it was very quick to go and do that. A rather nondescript looking van but with a number of registrar voter's workers there and a couple of sheriffs and you just drop that off. Again, they check—there's a whole chain of custody thing with all of this that you do and so they check that and then you go home. So, we tended to finish around 9:15 so you go from 7:30 to 9:15. Then on election day the polls open at 7 so you're there at 6:30 and then there's a more elaborate closedown routine. And we actually had a voter, the last voter... you can't do anything until all the voters are out. Every single one, the tail of the last voter has to disappear out the door. Then you can start to open up the ballot boxes, count things, and so on. And there was this one person, I swear, we think must have been OCD. Polls closed at 8:00, we didn't finally get her out until 9:30. We were doing like the restaurant when they're putting the chairs up on the tables around the last diners, so we were breaking down

KK: Giving them hints.

VC Hint, hint!

HE: Hint, hint, hint, you know! Yours is the only voter booth that's left standing. We got some of our breakdown done that evening. I actually didn't get out until 10:30. And then we had the setup day which was the Friday before the early voting days and then the day after election day we went in and you put everything away. They go back into these like rolling cages and we put them into a pod that is then picked up by the Registrar of Voters office and is put away.

VC: So, at any point in this whole process, were you ever concerned for your safety?

HE: No. No, it was very calm and as I said, people were very pleasant and as I said also, very patient waiting on line because at one point it was probably up to 40 minutes waiting.

KK: So, after this experience what were your takeaways from this? Would you think about doing it again?

HE: Yeah, it was very gratifying.

VC: So, did this experience change any of your perceptions about voting or the voting process?

HE: Not really. Not really. I mean I certainly... I'm old enough that I've voted many, many, many times, and it was very gratifying as much as the long hours and having to figure out how I was going to eat and what I was going to eat. I'm like an army, I travel on my stomach so knowing what I was going to eat was important. And it was very nice actually being in the student union they had a food court which was not open on the weekend but there was literally in there, and it was available, a whole wall of microwaves (VC: Oh, wow). So, I was able to go when I found that out, I was able to go and buy myself some, all sorts of microwaveable stuff and bring stuff from home so I could have good hot meals which was nice.

VC: What for you was the most rewarding part of doing this work?

HE: Just seeing people vote. When the line was out the door, I know it was hard on the people who were waiting and we were just working our butts off. But it was very gratifying to see all those people come and vote.

KK: Would you recommend others to do this?

HE: I would tell them about it and I would say, you know, it's very gratifying work if you like to see people vote and you interact with a lot of people so if you're gregarious like I am it's a lot of fun, but if you don't like long hours, it is demanding. It is demanding.

VC: So, you would do this again, yes?

HE: Yes.

VC: Excellent. Now do you have any advice for the future poll workers out there?

HE: Um... you'll learn. You just kind of have to nose around, ask questions, what will the hours be like, I was not surprised by the hours. You just have to decide if that's something you can do.

KK: Yeah. Because it's a tremendous commitment.

HE: Yeah. It was basically three days of training, two online, one hands on, and then a half day setup and half day breakdown and then the four days of voting.

KK: That's a lot.

He: Yeah, that's a lot.

VC: Indeed.

HE: But at least in Orange County, to be very honest, it's a very nice, short, part-time job.

VC: Sure, sure. And you're doing a public service while you're at it, so that's great. So, Harriet, is there anything that we didn't cover here that you'd like to add?

HE: Don't think so, other than I think that actually, from what I have been hearing in reporting in TV and radio and newspapers that actually the election did go very smoothly and I wish certainly the best for the people who are now counting the votes. That is something, I may call the registrar of voters and find out if people are needed for that in future elections and what's involved in doing that. I don't know if they bring in temporary people or if they just basically, all hands-on deck to do that with the people who work there but that is something I wouldn't mind helping with. And those are actually people in a place like Arizona where I would have more concern about if not their safety, certainly their peace of mind. I haven't heard of the kind of Brooks Brothers riots that they had in Florida in 2000 or the nonsense that went on in 2020 so actually things may be going more smoothly this time.

VC: Let us hope it continues to go smoothly. So, Harriet, thank you so much for being with us today and sharing your experiences. I know this is very informative, you've given us a bit of an inside look into the process.

HE: Well, this has been fun and it's an honor to be on your podcast. You've done a good job! I've been listening to it.

KK: Oh, thank you!

HE: I've heard all your episodes, went through them week by week.

VC: Thank you Harriet! We love loyal listeners.

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