

Book excerpt: Mary Lang Sollinger: “From Inspiration to Activism. A Personal Journey Through Obama’s Presidential Campaign”

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Mary Lang Sollinger, a Madison fundraiser and former mayoral candidate who became part of Barack Obama’s success in 2008, recounts her experience in a new book, “From Inspiration to Activism. A Personal Journey Through Obama’s Presidential Campaign.”

An early supporter of Obama, Sollinger hosted a fall 2007 fundraiser at her Madison home for the then-Illinois senator. She went on to organize 12 fundraisers throughout Wisconsin in 14 months. As a result, she was asked to serve on Obama’s national finance committee, both in 2008 and 2012. A planned book launch for April 9 has been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Books, priced \$17.95 each, can be ordered [here](#).

Read an excerpt about Sollinger’s experience at the Democratic National Convention in Denver below:

Wednesday’s theme for the day was “Securing America’s Future” and featured a speech by the vice-presidential candidate and Senator Joe Biden. Senator Biden engaged the entire audience with his “down-home,” sincere talk. He focused on Barack Obama’s nomination and what kind of hope and change our country would have if Senator Obama would be president.

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It was a truly memorable surprise seeing and hearing former presidential candidate

John Kerry speak that day. He had a different persona, far different from the stiff candidate I remembered when he had been campaigning in Madison. Now he was relaxed, smiling, and weaving funny jokes into his speech.

I looked at the two Madison delegates in front of me and the three on one side of me. We all shed tears of disbelief, wondering where this genuine-feeling person had been during the 2004 campaign. Back then, just a few weeks before Election Day, Senator Kerry had come to Madison with Bruce Springsteen. A major downtown street near campus had been closed off to accommodate the 80,000 people who came to see “The Boss” and the candidate for president.

It had been a get-out-the-vote event. If back then Kerry had been the person he was that night at the Pepsi Center, he could have won the election. People want authenticity. In that election, candidates from both parties had been “handled” too much, with carefully scripted speeches written by staffs and consultants who were guided by polls. The candidates lost their personalities and their authenticity. With an Obama/Biden ticket, things would be different.

On, the convention’s last day was at the Invesco Field/Mile High Stadium, a sports arena used mostly for the Denver Broncos. It was open to the elements. I hoped the weather stayed good. Happily, it was perfect that morning.

With my finance guest credential, I was able to go to a DNC National Finance Committee brunch. There was a shuttle from downtown to the restaurant, which was close to the stadium.

I found myself in a place where I didn’t know anyone. Very few people were by themselves like me. As I scanned the large, noisy room, everyone looked appealing and interesting. As I slowly moved through the crowd, I decided just to start talking to anyone else I spotted who was also alone.

I started talking to a young man about the historic evening coming up. Like me, he was from the Midwest—Chicago. It was good to share common ground. We discussed the chances of Obama and Biden winning in November, both of us cautiously optimistic.

After ten minutes, he asked my name. I just said, “Mary.”

His was Jesse. I looked at him again carefully, with a soft, questioning smile. “Jesse

Jackson's son?"

With a wide smile, he looked a bit surprised at the recognition.

"Holy smokes," I said. "What an honor." I read in a recent article that Jesse Jackson Sr. was still holding out his support for Obama, even though his son was a national co-chair of the Obama campaign. The younger Jesse was trying to persuade his father to come on board with Obama.

We talked a bit more before someone came over wanting to talk to Jesse. I had planned to meet some Wisconsin delegates in the stadium and left, wishing him the best.

The Democratic National Campaign Committee had a record crowd of more than 84,000 people in attendance. Eight thousand conventioners were on the playing field, and the other 76,000 would be roaring in the stands in a few hours.

I arrived a little late at the entrance where we had planned to meet and only saw Wisconsin delegates Roberta, Stan, and Jordan. Everyone else was in the stadium. The Wisconsin delegation was in the stands. We were told to go early to get a good seat.

Thanks again to the finance guest credential, I was in a small group of Wisconsin Dems on the playing field nearer the stage.

Governor Doyle and his wife, Jessica; some of his cabinet members; the superdelegates; and I would be sitting in this section. We were about thirty feet from the curtained four-foot barrier for the large staging area and podium. The stage was raised five to six feet. The Wisconsin VIP section would be able to see the speakers and the show from our chairs on the field.

It turned out that we had plenty of time to find our seats. They were testing the sound systems and screens. Security was doing another sweep for anything suspicious. It was fascinating to see the number of people and coordination needed to carry off a massive production like this.

I sat in our Wisconsin area and met the superdelegates from up north and Milwaukee. A young man named Milt came and took a seat next to Christine, a friend of mine from up north. This was Milt's second convention. We three had a lot to discuss. We talked about some of the memorable events of the last three days.

Milt was concerned about a rumor of protesters and security issues.

All three of us noticed how strange it was seeing the TV stations in the Pepsi Center—CNN, MSNBC, CBS, and ABC—elevated in what Wisconsin hunters would call “deer stands.” Reporters were located inside these basic huts, which—unlike deer stands—were surrounded by glass. They were about twenty feet above the conventioners and main floor. Their support crews were on the main floor and hardly seen, but they were always available when needed.

Our Wisconsin delegation seats were higher than they were. We could see inside because of the large glass windows. The reporters didn’t react to any sight or sound outside of the hut and rarely looked outside. Once in a while, they must have looked at the stage, but none of us ever saw that happen. They were on laptops, in their own world. The symbolism of their setup was not missed. The stadium was filling with people of every color and variety. There were the young and old. People in wheelchairs. Some were dressed for the warm day. Others wore dresses, suits, or colorful ethnic attire. I saw people in cowboy hats and others in their Sunday hats. From the crowd, I heard my name being called.

“Hey, Mary!”

I spotted John Imes. Back in October 2007 for Senator Obama’s fundraiser at my home, John was one of the very few donors I didn’t have to call up and ask for a donation. After receiving the invitation, he automatically signed up online. I remember that he asked if he could bring his two oldest children, Jack and Cora, for the photo op with the candidate.

“Of course,” I said, happy to have the next generation present.

But in Denver, I knew John wasn’t a delegate, so I was surprised to see him. I called him over and asked him how in the world he managed to get in.

When the DNC Convention was announced in 2008, John had to get creative and do some research to be able to attend his first convention. John was the executive director of Wisconsin Environmental Initiative, a nonprofit he co-founded in 1996 that advocates for green building, development, and clean water. As a member of Obama’s Energy & Environment (E&E) Policy Team, John wanted to get to the Denver convention and connect with fellow E&E team members whom he knew would be there.

But first, he needed to find a place to stay. Hotel rooms were scarce and prohibitively expensive; rentals like Airbnb were unavailable. He went on Craigslist, and after days of searching, he stumbled across a listing for a condo located at the RiverClay, the Rocky Mountain region's first green-certified residential development. John called, but the location was booked up.

John got bold and called the RiverClay developer and said he wanted to showcase RiverClay to his fellow members of the Obama campaign E&E Policy Team. To the developer's credit, he not only offered their model green condo to the group but offered it as their meeting place as well.

Two weeks later, John flew out. RiverClay had an opportunity to meet and discuss their project with the E&E group. John ended up on an air mattress in the manager's condo. The developer donated the generous rate of \$50 rate per night, for four nights, to the Obama campaign.

John began each day of the convention at the hotel where the Wisconsin delegation breakfasted every morning. He was able to secure credentials for each night plus tickets to special events. There were clean tech and green business round tables, campaign briefings and film sneak previews, bipartisan receptions and clean energy demonstrations.

And on that final, incredible, historic night at Invesco Field, John was grateful to be among the 84,000 people on hand when Barack Obama gave his nomination speech as the Democratic candidate for president. John proceeded to find a seat in the Wisconsin delegation in the stands.

It looked like the entire country was going to play a part in this memorable evening. It was reassuring and made me feel like "We Are the Ones" and "Yes, We Can." The program started with popular singer Sheryl Crow followed by the amazing Stevie Wonder. I enjoyed will.i.am and John Legend singing together with the Agape International Choir.

Under a clear and starry night, speakers included former Vice President Al Gore, Governor Tim Kaine of Virginia, Governor Bill Richardson of New Mexico, and Illinois Senator Dick Durbin.

When Barack Obama entered the stage, he was greeted with a long and resounding applause. It took several minutes before the crowd settled down. He reminded us

that “Our government should work for us, not against us. It should ensure opportunity, not just for those with the most money and influence, but for every American who is willing to work. That’s the promise of America, the idea that we are responsible for ourselves, but that we also rise and fall as one nation, and the fundamental belief that I am my brother’s keeper, I am my sister’s keeper. That’s the promise we need to keep, that’s the change we need right now.”

Michelle, Malia, Sasha, Joe and Jill Biden joined Candidate Obama on the stage. The long thunderous applause was then absorbed by enormous fireworks encircling the stadium.

Confetti blew over the stage. The young Obama girls loved it. I was amazed by how comfortable, reassured, and happy they were. It reflected what good parents both Barack and Michelle were.

Many conventioners—both men and women—were crying tears of joy. No one was in any hurry to leave. It was like everyone wanted to freeze this moment in time in their hearts and memory. But eventually, we all parted and hoped to see each other again.

More than thirty-eight million people across ten U.S. cable and broadcast TV networks tuned in to witness history. After being so incredibly inspired and motivated that night, I could only hope that all those viewers watching from home felt the same—not only to vote for Obama but to get involved right away and work for the election of Obama and Biden.

For John, those three days of networking and making contacts were important for the meaningful work that lay ahead for him in Madison.

A few months later, when Barack Obama was president, a “National House Party Day to Re-energize America” event was organized. The national event included thousands of guests at 220 house parties in all fifty states engaged in a national conversation on green jobs, clean technology, climate change, and energy independence. Participants represented the political, business, and activist spectrums.

John organized the National House Night at the Orpheum Theater in downtown Madison, which seats over one thousand. The program consisted of remarks from President Barack Obama and a national live teleconference with former Vice President Al Gore, where he addressed John’s question about ways “we might better

engage mainstream corporations and Main Street businesses.” Later, John was empowered to run successfully for local office and continues to serve on municipal commissions.

With experience in the hospitality business and his boundless energy, John also had been a great help at many of my fundraisers through the years. That historic day in Denver, when we accidentally saw each other at Mile High Stadium, we agreed that politics as usual is no longer an option.

We both had the good fortune to work inside the Obama culture where putting our state and country was first and foremost. We returned to Madison energized, promising that we would be involved and do all we could to elect Barack Obama over the nine weeks left before the November election.