

PROFILES IN CITIZENSHIP: DAVID AXELROD



Courtesy of Jamie Manley and Axelrod Strategies.

David Axelrod got involved in his first campaign pamphleteering for Bobby Kennedy when he was nine years old, and from then through his days as communications director for Barack Obama's senate and presidential campaigns, to a stint in the White House as senior advisor to the president, to his current gig as founding director at the University of Chicago's Institute of Politics, he has pretty much lived his dream. Sometimes it is tempting to look at a person as successful as Axelrod has

been and think, "Boy, did he get lucky." In Axelrod's case, however, it's clear he made it happen, every single step of the way, through an unlikely combination of starry-eyed idealism and dogged determination.

Though he grew up in New York, Axelrod has been an adopted Chicagoan since his days as an undergrad at University of Chicago. He quickly fell in love with the city and with Chicago politics—talking himself into an internship at the *Chicago Tribune*, where he spent two and a half years covering local politics on the night shift, and more years in the trenches before landing a coveted column. Watching '70s Chicago in transition from the old political machine and the evolution of the black independent political movement embodied by Harold Washington was a formative experience. When Axelrod left the paper to set up his own consulting business, it was a leap of faith; he had been bitten, hard, by the campaign bug.

Campaigns are like a narcotic, says the man who has been instrumental in running so many of them. "They are these existential experiences, where you are running full speed for months, sometimes years, and all for one day. And when they end, you feel let down and you're looking for the next challenge... There is something really invigorating, inspiring about being part of an effort too, to make change, to make a difference. Where you feel like you're doing something that's bigger than yourself and you're surrounded by people who share that [emotion] and that experience. I just love the feel of campaign headquarters. I love being among people, many of whom volunteer, there because they want to make their community and the country stronger. And they're inspiring to me.

They're often young people... and I love being among young people because you know even in the most cynical of times they're inspiring. They're properly skeptical but they're not cynical."

Axelrod's story is all about finding inspiration not just in volunteers and students but in the authentic figures who can see themselves clearly in relation to their times, and who believe in the transformative power of good government to make people's lives better—figures from Illinois Senator Paul Simon, to Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick, to the young Illinois state legislator who Axelrod helped to put in the White House.

For him, authenticity is the key to making a public figure inspiring and, indeed, electable. "I think that authenticity is an essential ingredient for successful candidates and successful leaders," he says. "If you don't feel comfortable in your own skin then voters are not going to feel comfortable with you."

In fact, it was the seeming lack of authenticity he was finding in those seeking out his services that caused him to hook up with Barack Obama. "He was considering a race for the Senate—this seemed to me like a way to recharge my batteries... I always liked him. He was very public spirited, he seemed like a good guy. He always knew why he wanted to be in public life and what he wanted to do. And I really admired him and that became a great partnership." A partnership, of course, that made history

In his post-White House days Axelrod is looking forward to spending more time with the family he feels has given him