

My Lesson From Don

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This January, I stood on a sidewalk in a small town in New Hampshire and thought about being cold. I thought it was the coldest moment of my life. I had signed up to work as a campaign volunteer during winter break, and my main task every day was to canvass, walking through neighborhoods and talking to voters about the upcoming election, trying to win their support. Each canvass took hours, and this particular day, the frigid air had been augmented by a biting wind and steady rain, which cut through my coat and into my boots. It didn't help that most of my knocks went unanswered, or the few that were usually resulted in brief exchanges where the voter tried to get me to leave as quickly as possible. I was tired, freezing, and really looking forward to a chance to dry off. It was with this mentality that I approached my last door of the day.

I knocked, and was greeted by a pleasant middle-aged woman. I started with my standard talking points, and asked if she had made up her mind about who to support in the upcoming election.

"I'm not quite sure," she said. "But if I were voting today, it would probably be for Donald Trump."

In case you weren't sure, this was not the response I was hoping for.

I was working from lists of registered Democrats and left-leaning independents, and had not met any other Trump supporters during my weeks of canvassing. I was taken aback. I struggled, awkwardly asking what issues were most important to her. But before I could finish, she looked around at the pouring rain and invited me in. Tired, cold, my feet soaked to the bones, I accepted her invitation.

We made our way past her husband watching television and sat at the kitchen table, and I asked what it was that made her support Trump. “He’s tough,” she said. “It seems like we just keep getting pushed around, around the world, and Trump seems like he will stand up for America.” She emphasized the threat from the Islamic State: “These folks, they’re beheading people, they’re persecuting Christians, and they’re coming over to Europe and California and...” her voice trailed off. We talked about Russia (“Putin doesn’t respect us, and doesn’t respect Obama”), and jobs (“we need to get our manufacturing and factories back from foreign countries”). We sat and talked for almost thirty minutes, an unusually long time for a canvassing conversation, and finally I got up to leave.

Before I made my out, however, I also spoke with my host’s husband, who had been listening and wanted to add his opinion. He told me he was between Clinton and Sanders, but was worried about issues like non-citizens abusing birthright citizenship — “I’m all for people coming here and making something of themselves and making the

country better...but what about the ones who just come here, have kids and then get social security and Medicare and all those entitlements?" He talked about his job, "I worked in a factory, and I was a leader of the local union, and most of the employees were Hispanic, and I always got along fine with them! But now, these people coming over the border just for the benefits..." And he asked me why "political correctness" now seemed to dominate everything, exclaiming, "Why can't we have Christmas trees? Why do they have to be Holiday trees?" I listened, feeling slowly returning to my toes, responded when I could, and after another twenty minutes, finally made my way back to the road.

Why tell this story? Because it caught me so much by surprise. It has been easy for me to forget that for all of the distasteful things he says, Donald Trump, appeared to many people to be the only candidate telling the truth, the only champion who can make the country great again in the face of corruption, illegality, and malaise. And even if Trump drops out of the race next week, these people will remain.

For me, that conversation turned things upside down. The point of canvassing is to meet with voters, to break down their misconceptions so they see the election your way. But, in this moment, the perceptions that were most challenged were my own. I don't know if I won a vote that day, or if the couple even remembers me. But as I watch this and future elections unfold, I know I will remember them.