



Hughes, Chris (b. 1983), and Sean Eldridge (b. 1986)

by Linda Rapp

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Chris Hughes has been a creative force in two enormously successful on-line ventures, the social networking site Facebook and the web site My.BarackObama.com, which was key to the candidate's victory in the 2008 presidential election. In each case, his focus was on the power of community and on facilitating communication among members of groups.

He and his partner Sean Eldridge have lent their own voices and resources to the cause of glbtq rights, particularly marriage equality.

Chris Hughes was born November 26, 1983 in Hickory, North Carolina, a small, conservative town in the western part of the state. Not entirely comfortable in his hometown, he longed to go away to prep school.

Given his family's modest income, achieving that dream seemed unlikely; nevertheless, as a high school freshman Hughes, unbeknownst to his parents, applied to a number of boarding schools.

The prestigious Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts not only accepted him but also offered financial aid that would allow him to attend.

Hughes enrolled at the Phillips Academy as a sophomore. The milieu was so different from Hickory that, Hughes told Amy Schatz of the *Wall Street Journal*, the transition "was the hardest year of my life."

Despite the initial culture shock, Hughes blossomed at the school. He excelled academically and also discovered an interest in politics. He became president of the Young Democrats organization and was a campaign volunteer for Al Gore in the 2000 presidential election.

While he was at Phillips, Hughes recognized that he was gay. "I went to boarding school Southern, religious, and straight, and I left boarding school not being at all religious and not being straight," he stated to Ellen McGirt of *Fast Company*.

Because of his exceptional performance in high school Hughes earned a scholarship to Harvard in 2002. During his sophomore year he roomed with Mark Zuckerberg, a student who was working with another dorm-mate, Dustin Moskovitz, to create an on-line version of Harvard's "facebook," a publication with photos and basic information about students to help them meet each other. Zuckerberg invited Hughes to join the project.

Zuckerberg and Moskovitz were computer geeks proficient in the technical aspects of the process, such as writing software codes. Hughes's emphasis was on the users: how they would want to connect with others,



Chris Hughes (top) and Sean Eldridge. The image of Chris Hughes was created by Flickr user USV and appears under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license. The image of Sean Eldridge was created by Wikimedia Commons contributor Mzorick and appears under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

how they could share information, how their concerns about privacy could be addressed.

Hughes's input earned him the nickname "the Empath"—perhaps slightly derisive among die-hard techies but also reflective of what would be his crucial role in the development of Facebook.

In the summer of 2004 Hughes, Zuckerberg, and Moskovitz went to California, seeking venture capital for the fledgling Facebook site.

Zuckerberg and Moskovitz dropped out of college and relocated to Palo Alto to work on Facebook full-time, but Hughes continued his education. A major in French history and literature, he studied for a semester in Paris and graduated *magna cum laude* in 2006.

Hughes, who had continued his association with the project on a part-time basis during the academic year and spent his summers working on it in California, then moved to Palo Alto for a full-time job with Facebook. Among the projects on which he worked was the establishment of pages for candidates running for election in 2006.

The freshman United States senator from Illinois, Barack Obama, was not on the ballot that year; nevertheless, he and his staff recognized the value of the Internet tool.

Hughes helped Obama set up a site at that time, and shortly thereafter, in January 2007, he was asked to take on a new role in the media operation of Obama's campaign for President of the United States.

Hughes's Facebook partners were stunned when he announced his departure from the burgeoning enterprise so that he could work for Obama. Hughes did not, however, completely sever his ties with the company, retaining a minimal ownership share—reportedly about a mere one percent—but, because of the company's extraordinary success, enough to make him financially secure for life and able to pursue other projects.

[Hughes has described David Fincher's film about the founding of Facebook, *The Social Network* (2010), as a good story but has emphasized that Aaron Sorkin's screenplay is fiction rather than fact. The film, in which Hughes is portrayed by actor Patrick Mapel, minimizes Hughes' role as a founder of the company.]

Hughes moved to Chicago, the headquarters of the Obama campaign. The day that Senator Obama declared his candidacy, two web sites were launched—a standard campaign site, BarackObama.com, and Hughes's brainchild, My.BarackObama.com, nicknamed MyBO. The latter generated so much interest and traffic that on its first day of operation it nearly crashed.

The genius of MyBO, wrote McGirt, was that it was "a surprisingly intuitive and fun-to-use networking Web site that allowed Obama supporters to create groups, plan events, raise funds, download tools, and connect with one another . . . and reach [the candidate's] most passionate supporters cheaply and effectively."

She further noted that over the course of the campaign "volunteers had created more than 2 million profiles on the site, planned 200,000 offline events, formed 3,500 groups, posted 400,000 blogs, and raised \$30 million on 70,000 personal fund-raising pages."

Peter Daou, the Internet director for the Hillary Clinton campaign, told José Antonio Vargas of the *Washington Post* that the initiative was "an operation that everyone will be studying for campaigns to come."

At the beginning of his association with the campaign, however, Hughes became somewhat frustrated

because the architects of it were narrowly focusing on victories in the early-voting states rather than looking at the big picture. "There was no way I could walk into [campaign manager] David Plouffe's office and say I'd need ten people," he told McGirt. "He'd say, 'What for?' And I'd say, 'To create a national grassroots infrastructure of peers.' And he'd say, 'How is that going to help us win Iowa?'"

Candidate Obama did win in Iowa but lost to Hillary Clinton in New Hampshire a few days later, and the importance of a nationwide strategy began to become apparent. "All of a sudden, it made a difference that we have 60 really organized groups in Kansas, a caucus state. And a hugely active Boise for Obama group," Hughes recounted to McGirt.

Marcia Carlyn, co-administrator of Loudon County for Obama, praised Hughes and his MyBO team for the victory in the Virginia primary in February 2008. "We couldn't have done this without the MyBO site," she declared. "When we first asked the campaign for resources, they said forget it. Everything was going to Iowa."

Such results were repeated around the country. The Neighbor-to-Neighbor tool helped create effective community groups for canvassing and calling, and the Vote for Change tool enabled a million people to register to vote.

Jeremy Bird, the state director of the campaign in Maryland, spoke to McGirt of the efficiency of Hughes's operation: "They had the entire thing set up— an office with seven computers, phone lines, a state structure, county chairs, and meetings every other Saturday. . . . Everywhere we went, we could plug in a zip code, and a list of really excited volunteers would pop up."

The efficacy of MyBO in tapping into people's interest and in organizing campaign volunteers was clearly unsurpassed.

After his involvement in the Obama campaign, Hughes began a new on-line venture, Jumo, which means "together in concert" in the west African language Yoruba, a site geared toward connecting potential contributors with charitable organizations.

Ever the "empath," Hughes stated to Jenna Wortham of the *New York Times* that "the more connected an individual is to an issue they care about, the higher probability there is they will stay involved over a longer period of time."

Jumo, launched in November 2010, began with over 3,000 issues and groups. Hughes accepted only those certified as tax-exempt in order to avoid fraudulent solicitations.

The causes being championed on Jumo are multifarious, but one issue that is especially important to Hughes himself is marriage equality. On New Year's Eve 2010, on a vacation trip to Thailand, he became engaged to his partner of five years, Sean Eldridge.

Eldridge, born on July 31, 1986, the son of two physicians, grew up in Toledo, Ohio. He excelled at the city's Ottawa Hills High School, graduating in the top ten percent of his class. He was also on the varsity track team, a participant in theater productions, and a youth representative on the Toledo Board of Community Relations.

After his graduation from high school, Eldridge enrolled at Deep Springs College, a small, highly-selective, all-male two-year institution located in the high desert of California. The college typically admits from 10 to 15 students per year; after Deep Springs, most students continue their studies at such institutions as Harvard, the University of Chicago, Yale, and Stanford. More than half of Deep Springs alumni go on to earn doctorate degrees.

At Deep Springs, which is founded on the three pillars of academics, labor, and self-governance, students must do farm chores on the campus ranch in addition to taking classes and participating in decisions about curriculum, faculty hiring, and admissions. Furthermore, they must abstain from drinking alcohol, smoking, and using narcotics, in keeping with founder Lucien Nunn's vision of training bright young men to become leaders at an academic venue devoid of the temptations of liquor and women.

It is thus somewhat ironic that Eldridge came out as a gay man at Deep Springs, something he had not felt able to do in Ohio. "Growing up I really didn't see out people, so it just didn't seem like an option," he told JC Reindl of the *Toledo Blade*. "There were no out students or out faculty or real out adults that I knew growing up in Ottawa Hills and Toledo."

After a year at Deep Springs, Eldridge was accepted at Brown University but deferred his enrollment to spend some time working in Boston. It was there that a fellow Deep Springs alumnus introduced him to Hughes in 2005. Their romance blossomed immediately, and they quickly became a committed couple.

When Hughes moved to Palo Alto in 2006 Eldridge accompanied him and took a job with a software company. Once Hughes relocated to Chicago to work on the Obama campaign, Eldridge enrolled at Brown but made frequent trips to Illinois. Eldridge also became actively involved in the campaign effort, working as an organizer of Students for Barack Obama.

Following Eldridge's graduation from Brown in 2009, the couple moved to New York City, where Eldridge entered the law school at Columbia University.

In early 2010, however, after the New York legislature failed to pass a bill that would have brought marriage equality to the state, Eldridge left Columbia to become an advocate for the cause. He accepted a position as Political Director of Freedom to Marry, a non-profit organization devoted to securing equal rights for gay and lesbian couples. He served in that position until June 2011.

Hughes and Eldridge have been generous donors to the drive for marriage equality; in 2010, the couple announced a \$225,000 challenge grant by which they would match donations to the cause, including \$100,000 to Freedom to Marry. Indeed, they made the public announcement of their engagement in January 2011 at their loft home in lower Manhattan a fundraiser for marriage equality.

But, stated Evan Wolfson, the founder of Freedom to Marry, to Reindl, "As wonderful as it is to have the money that they donated, I even more value Sean's talent and passion and partnership in the actual work. This is someone who's not just writing checks, but is really rolling up his sleeves and helping build a campaign day-to-day."

Hughes declared to Ari Karpel of *The Advocate* that he and Eldridge "both want to have a serious impact on the world" and so are following the example of Tim Gill of the Gill Foundation and Jon Stryker of the Arcus Foundation, who support both glbtq rights and other progressive causes.

Hughes and Eldridge were invited to President Obama's first state dinner in 2009. Nevertheless, Eldridge commented to Karpel in 2011, "[Obama] says he's on this journey, [but] I think he's not moving quickly enough. I know that in his heart of hearts he has respect for us, he has respect for gay people. But he doesn't get a free pass."

Eldridge also noted that he "was lucky to be there to watch [Obama] sign the bill when he ended military discrimination"—referring to the repeal of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy.

However, Eldridge added, "It's not all on him; it's on us as well." Not surprisingly, he and Hughes have taken

an active role and have been visible advocates for glbtq rights.

"As a gay man, I want the freedom to marry Sean so we can build a family and a life together over the long term," Hughes told Reindl. "I think marriage is a basic fundamental freedom that every American should have."

In his capacity as Political Director of Freedom to Marry, Eldridge participated in the events that culminated in the victory of June 24, 2011, when the New York Senate voted in favor of marriage equality and Governor Andrew Cuomo soon after signed the bill into a law that became effective on July 24.

After leaving his position as Political Director of Freedom to Marry, Eldridge founded Protect Our Democracy, an advocacy group based in Garrison that seeks campaign finance reform. He also established Hudson River Ventures, an investment firm.

In March 2012, Hughes announced that he had acquired a majority stake in *The New Republic* and would become the liberal journal's publisher and editor-in-chief.

He said that his motive in purchasing the journal was his interest in "the future of high-quality long-form journalism" and by an instinct that such journalism was a natural fit for tablet computers like the iPad. He said he would "expand the amount of rigorous reporting and solid analysis" that the magazine produces and that, while he does not intend to end the printed publication, he expects that "five to 10 years from now, if not sooner, the vast majority of *The New Republic* readers are likely to be reading it on a tablet."

Hughes and Eldridge were wed on June 30, 2012 at their home in Garrison, New York. The ceremony was followed by a reception that evening in New York City.

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