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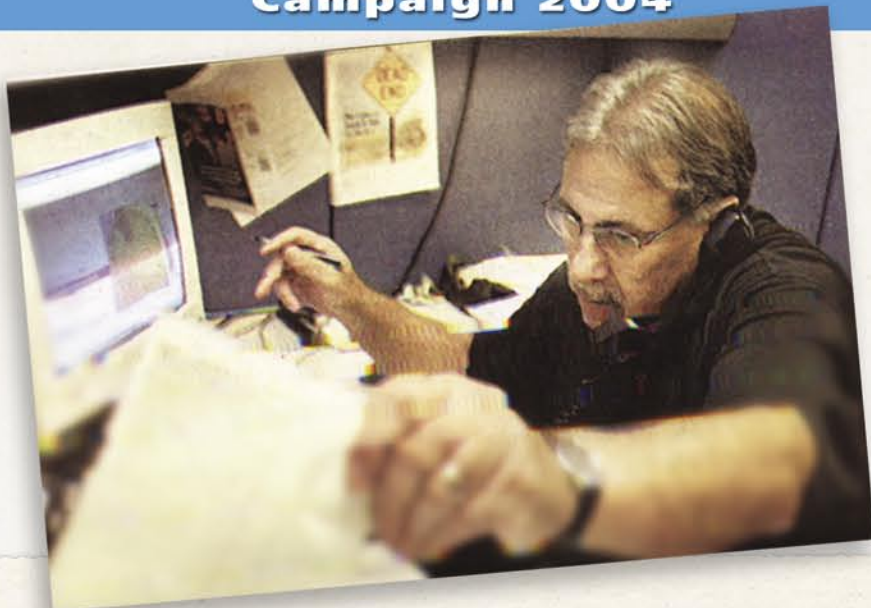
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Message controller

Capital man oversees Kerry-Edwards direct-mail campaign

By David Whitney
BEE WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON — It's hard to get into the Democratic National Committee's headquarters on Capitol Hill these days.

Mail is stacked at the front door, some arriving and some going.

Boxes of materials from the Democratic National Convention give the place the feel of a Greyhound bus station. There's a constant stream of Energizer Bunny staffers, most sporting Kerry-Edwards buttons, running in and out, in and out.

On this day, one of them is Phil Giarrizzo, looking ashen and stressed, as he begins the second week of a "once in a lifetime" stint as the DNC's principal gatekeeper on direct mail.

"Every day that I've been here for the last week. I've learned 10 new things a day," Giarrizzo said with a sigh.

This is not how the 53-year-old Sacramento political consultant thought he would be spending the early fall. He was quite content running his own campaign and grassroots lobbying firm when a post-convention shake-up at Democratic presidential hopeful John Kerry's campaign put him on a one-way trip to Washington.

One of those involved in the reshuffle was Michael Whouley, who many people think is one of the best political field operatives in the business. Whouley was dispatched to the DNC to run the Kerry-Edwards operation.

Giarrizzo and Whouley have known each other nearly a decade, and four years ago they

worked together in the Iowa caucuses for former Vice President Al Gore.

Whouley called Giarrizzo and asked him to pack for Washington to oversee the DNC's direct-mail campaign.

"I needed someone with focus, who could read mail, has good instincts, could read polls and who could keep his head about him in a tough campaign," Whouley said. "I knew it was a great sacrifice to pull him away from his family for a month, but he agreed to come."

"It wasn't an easy decision."

Giarrizzo said his policy was never to be away from his family for more than two consecutive nights.

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Giarrizzo recalled the convention with his 11-year-old son, Zack, that put him on the first plane to Washington.

"He said that this was such a great opportunity," Giarrizzo said. "He said it was down to two guys now and one of them needs you, so you must be pretty good at what you do."

Giarrizzo got his start in politics 30 years ago, when he headed the 40,000 member Service Employees International Union Local 660 in Los Angeles and served on the union's national executive board.

In the late 1980's, he switched careers, taking over the campaign committee of California Assembly Democrats. Later he served on the staff of Assembly Speaker Willie Brown and worked for other Assembly members before opening his political consulting business in 1991.

His firm has run campaigns for more than a dozen bond issues for libraries, utilities and schools. More recently, Giarrizzo represented California State University faculty in a campaign

to stop the deep cuts in higher education spending initially proposed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. And he was responsible for direct mail in Western states for Gen. Wesley Clark's Democratic presidential primary campaign.

Millions of pieces of mail are sent daily to the 20 or so battleground states. Very little of it actually passes through Giarrizzo's hands.

His job is message control.

"I work on message strategy and consistency between ten states," he said. "We want to make sure our message is honed well to a particular audience."

The mailings are largely written by consultants working for state Democratic Party organizations, although he said sometimes he ends up editing or finding new artwork for particular pieces.

But for the most part, Giarrizzo spends his days in the crowded basement office of the DNC, running from meeting to phone call, playing the role of Mr. Consistency. His job is to make sure that what goes out from the state operations not only hits its intended targets, but doesn't conflict with what the Kerry-Edwards campaign is saying on

the road or with what other state operations are saying.

"Everything gets verified through the national operation to make sure positions are accurate, that the positions reflect Senator Kerry's positions and that the citations and examples are all accurate," he said.

Before taking the job, Giarrizzo admitted, he had doubts about the effectiveness of the direct mail in this campaign. Because the country is so polarized and the number of uncommitted voters apparently so small, he said, he wondered if direct mail could have much impact.

"But the thing that direct mail does that television advertising doesn't provide information in a much deeper way and to a direct audience," he said.

So for as many as 23 hours a day, Giarrizzo is honing, meeting and telephoning. But he doesn't mind.

"I don't think I've ever been so consistently proud of the kind of people I get to work with," he said. Then his cell phone began ringing and he headed back into hyperactivity.