

IMAGEMAKERS

Grassroots Initiative Seeks to Mow Down Establishment Politics

Aiming to change landscape of the city and political consulting, firm takes root

BY JOHN R.D. CELOCK

EACH YEAR IN NEW YORK, political neophytes attempt to run for dozens of offices. Often, they fall through the cracks of the state's complicated ballot access laws.

Rushing to the rescue is Grassroots Initiative, a political consulting firm which bills itself as the world's first non-profit firm. Founded in 2005, the firm seeks to provide easy political access for underrepresented groups and other political outsiders across the city.

The firm claims success with county committee races in various boroughs and has used its website to recruit candidates for office.

Grassroots was founded by Jeff Merritt, a University of Michigan and Columbia University graduate looking for a way to spread political participation to new groups. He developed the idea for the group after spending time working for State Department-sponsored programs in Eastern Europe to spread democracy.

Encouraging political participation in other countries while seeing a closed-off system at home was upsetting, he said.



ANDREW SCHWARTZ

"I was surprised about how closed the system was and how hard it was to get into the system," Merritt said. "I was a lower middle-class kid who had gone to top schools. And if someone like me can't get into the process, there is something wrong with the process. I wanted to bring that 'real democracy' back to the United States."

Grassroots Initiative differs from the traditional political consulting firm in part because of its non-profit status. Under federal tax laws, the group cannot advocate for the election of any candidate. This prohibition leads the group to function primarily as a clearinghouse for candidates, providing access to information on ballot access, voter lists and election attorneys.

Merritt and his small staff also provide assistance to candidates on strategy and voter outreach. To stay within federal law, the firm's services are not limited by party and are not necessarily limited to only one candidate per race.

Grassroots has also been providing resources on its website encouraging people how to run for office. While the website lists all the offices open to New Yorkers, Grassroots has been centering its work on recruiting candidates for the county committees. These traditionally sinecure offices allow for a lot of potential for budding politicians, Merritt said. The process of running for county committee is a small-scale version of a race for higher office laws. Alex Carabelli, Grassroots' deputy director, said past successful county committee candidates assisted by the group have redefined the

job's role, turning their positions into mini-Council members. This has included hosting town hall meetings and roundtables on policy issues, and providing assistance to constituents.

Grassroots success stories have included the first Sikhs to win office in the city, for positions on the Queens Democratic Committee. This year's clients include a group of young professionals seeking Democratic committee seats in Brooklyn.

Bert Mandeville, the executive secretary of the Harlem Republican Club, said her group has been using Grassroots for a year to elect district leaders and committee members. She said in addition to the traditional services offered, Grassroots offered a chance for her and other Republicans to network with Democratic candidates across the city, which she said has laid the groundwork for future coalitions.

"It can be scary and they take the fear away," she said. "They are people who won't hurt you and do not have a political agenda, except to get people into the process. It's quite unique."

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johncelock@aol.com

Direct letters to the editor to
editor@cityhallnews.com.