

Charlotte's quiet Democratic Convention organizer

By Jim Morrill

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As others reveled in the hoopla that marked the announcement that Charlotte had won the 2012 Democratic National Convention, Will Miller stayed where he usually does: in the background.

But as interim executive director of Charlotte's host committee, Miller was a key player in the preparations that led to the selection.

And while national Democratic officials are likely to name one of their own to run the convention, Miller is expected to play a continuing role as organizers mount the massive, 18-month effort to host one of the nation's great political spectacles.

"I can't see this going forward without him involved in some way, shape or form and in some significant role," says former Mayor Harvey Gantt, who is helping design and build the local organization. "He already has proven his worth."

Readily ceding the spotlight to Mayor Anthony Foxx and Duke Energy CEO Jim Rogers, co-chairs of the local effort, the low-key Miller quietly coordinated consultants and other players and even became the surrogate face of Charlotte organizers.

"I don't like to be visible," says Miller. "I've always felt more comfortable doing what I could do from behind the curtain."

A Davidson College graduate and Winston-Salem native, Miller has had careers in politics, real estate and development. Through it all, he's been active in his adopted community.

He served on the Mecklenburg County elections board and is vice chair of the Charlotte Housing Authority. He started two nonprofits - including one called Second String Santa - and led or helped lead more than half a dozen others, even while serving on a variety of other community boards.

Six years ago, he left the business world to focus on philanthropy.

"I just never felt I was making a meaningful contribution," he says.

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When Charlotte was named a convention finalist in June, Miller was one of the people Foxx called to his office for a conference call with party leaders. The next thing he knew, he says, the mayor was asking him to run the organizing committee.

"He had the right level of impatience that we needed to make this happen," Foxx says. "There's a lot of hurry-up and wait in a process like this."

Foxx and the host committee will meet with Democratic National Committee officials today in Washington.

Miller, 54, got his political start early.

He was 15 in 1972 when he went door-to-door handing out fliers for Democratic gubernatorial candidate Skipper Bowles. After working for his father's insurance company out of college, he joined childhood friend Doug Sosnik on a campaign for a Michigan congressman.

"He's smart, focused," says Sosnik, who went on to become President Bill Clinton's political director. "It's never about him. He's never really been out front."

After a stint in Washington as the congressman's executive assistant, Miller moved to Connecticut to work for Democratic pollster Stan Greenberg. In 1985, he came to Charlotte and began working in real estate. A few years later he joined a new commercial development company, Beacon Partners.

He helped Beacon expand from a company that developed and managed fewer than a half-million square feet to 10 times that amount.

"He's not so much a detail guy as a big-picture thinker, creator and innovator," says Beacon partner Pete Lash.

Miller shared Beacon's success. He left the company in 2004 and has since immersed himself in the nonprofit world. A few months after he left Beacon, he started a Charlotte chapter of Social Venture Partners.

Each of the group's current 69 partners pledges \$5,000 a year for a pool for needy community groups. They also use their professional skills and educational backgrounds as a sort of venture capital to support social initiatives in the community.

"He loves community-based stuff," says Lash. "He's got a big heart ... And he loves just to go make things happen."

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