

Selling Obama: Politics, profit drive memorabilia

By Leiloni De Gruy
Special to Sentinel-Voice

LOS ANGELES (NNPA) — Politics and profit drive those who deal in Barack Obama memorabilia, many of whom have set up shop in nearly every corner of South L.A. and beyond.

Street vendors and brick-and-mortar businesses across South Los Angeles are cashing in on the Barack Obama phenomenon, fueling a trend that is making T-shirts, pins and buttons, hats and even underwear featuring the Democratic presidential nominee some of the hottest fashion statements of the moment.

For consumers, the items are souvenirs of a landmark moment in American history, as well as an opportunity to advertise their political allegiance during one of the most charged presidential elections in recent memory.

As for the sellers, a natural question arises: Are they motivated by politics or profit?

"What do you think, this is a joke? We wouldn't be out here selling this stuff if we didn't believe in it," said one street vendor who declined to give his name, but frequently sells Obama T-shirts out of a van parked at the corner of Slauson Avenue and Crenshaw Boulevard. "And people wouldn't buy the stuff if they didn't believe in it."

Damy Jean, owner of a small, nearby retail store specializing in African clothing and alterations, said he began selling Obama T-shirts a little more than a week ago. He has yet to sell any, but "started because a

few people who came in asked for them."

Shahiem Beloved, on the other hand, said his items are "selling like crazy." With more than 15 Obama items — ranging from T-shirts and caps, to pendants, earrings and incense — the vendor, who works in a tent in front of a Crenshaw District soul food restaurant, sees a daily profit with most items selling for up to \$30.

"Everything with his name tag sells... It's a marketable name," explained Beloved, who said that customers of all races, and from throughout Southern California, have purchased items from him. Business is so brisk he said, that his stock must be replenished every

other day. "If they came up with Obama jeans they would sell"

Often, Beloved added, sales come with lengthy sessions of political dialogue on the subject of Obama's candidacy. "I think it created an awareness," he said. "Lots of people stop and have long conversations about [the election]... The streets, period, are supporting him. I've had Asians, Indians, Latinos, all nationalities come here to buy stuff."

"It hasn't empowered them yet, it's an incentive," he continued. "This election will determine how far they will take it. The older generations get it, but the younger generation still needs help getting it. If he loses, they

[youth] will still be looking for something; they will still be depressed."

If Obama wins the presidential election, Beloved said, "all the value on the items goes up." Asked what would happen if Obama does not prevail on Nov. 4, he replied, "Well, that's a nervous question."

South L.A. resident Dorothy Ridge, who is in the target demographic at which many of these items are aimed, said the proliferation of Obama gear goes well beyond trendy political fashion. "It's not just a T-shirt, this is history," she said. "I was around when opportunities like this were unheard of, and if you even had dreams of getting this far, it might have

gotten you killed. Some Black people today don't know what to fight for. They are so busy fighting each other that they don't realize they should be fighting for change, within themselves and within the system."

Marketing experts said that buyers of Obama paraphernalia could be motivated by a variety of factors.

"Consumers buy based on need. One would assume that some are buying because they believe he will make a difference, while others are buying to make a statement on how much they disapprove of Bush," said David Arnold, marketing lecturer at Loyola Marymount University. "They are not buying to rally against McCain as

much as they are using this opportunity to express disappointment in a system that has allowed Bush to fail in his vow to protect the American people and protect the Constitution. Also, another contributing factor can be attributed to Obama garnering celebrity support that has had a spillover effect that makes his image more appealing. In business we call it cognitive dissonance. Combine that with his use of the Web in his fundraising efforts, and it becomes very impressive."

In terms of vendors, Arnold said, "If they believe in it, then it just means they are willing to take less of a profit if a risk exists." As for how long the craze for Obama memorabilia could last, he predicted that it would subside "100 days after Obama is in office, if he wins. Reality always catches up to all of us."

Lars Perner, assistant professor of marketing at USC's Marshall School of Business, agreed that interest in Obama gear is bound to wane, and said the sheer number of vendors selling the items is likely to result in better deals for buyers.

"Many people probably like to try to make a fast buck, but the thing is if a lot of people are selling this merchandise it may drive down the price. It can also be somewhat of a risk investment. ...I can imagine some are making a profit. The hype has certainly provided them with an opportunity to sell a product and with an increasing interest now of course, it's just a short-term phenomenon with the election... You (See Memorabilia, Page 3)



Bill Evans displays some of the Obama-related campaign swag. Many folks across the nation sell Obama paraphernalia.

Sentinel-Voice photo by Ramon Savoy

T-shirt

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T-shirt or button — could be classified as passive electioneering, a misdemeanor in some states, depending on how the attire is interpreted by authorities.

The laws are meant to protect elections against voter intimidation and swaying decisions. But the written definition of electioneering is murky in some states. Virginia is a critical swing state in this year's presidential election, but its voters aren't the only ones confused about the issue of what constitutes electioneering.

The state's board of elections are even having a hard time interpreting the law in a way that they could defini-

tively inform their voting public.

"Section 24.2-604 of the Code of Virginia creates a 40-foot neutral zone in which campaign material is prohibited, but there has been some confusion among the voting population in recent weeks as far as the definition of excessive campaigning at the polling place," the Virginia State Board of Elections said in a statement.

"As a result, the State Board of Elections will meet on October 14 to make a ruling on the draft policy."

Such states as Ohio, Tennessee and Texas emphatically ban the display of political buttons, caps, stickers and other like items within

100 feet of polls while they are open.

Kevin Kidder, spokesman for the Ohio Secretary of State's Office, says that while there are restrictions against wearing political paraphernalia, the right to vote comes first.

"Voters are not allowed to wear campaign paraphernalia," Kidder said.

"We'll ask them to turn it inside out. Put a jacket over it. The right to vote is absolute; so you'll be allowed to vote, but you can be charged later."

Other states like Georgia and Florida have laws that are more lax. According to Florida Department of State spokeswoman Jennifer

Davis, her state's definition of electioneering is reserved for more obvious campaigning.

"There's no overt soliciting such as handing out campaign material," Davis states. But when asked if there are any restrictions on the wearing of campaign paraphernalia she says, "Absolutely not. You can wear whatever you want. The only restriction is for the people working at the elections all day."

She added, "I can't imagine any restriction on that sort of thing because of free speech concerns."

Some courts don't see it that way.

A 2001 Washington, D.C. Circuit Court ruled against

voter David Marlin, who had taken the D.C. Board of Elections and Ethics to court for denying his ballot because he wore a sticker supporting a specific mayoral candidate. The court sided with the board citing a Supreme Court ruling that stated that polling places are not a forum to engage in public discourse and such "view-point neutral" laws are a constitutional and necessary means of ensuring an orderly election process.

Such laws have sparked widespread debate, even among students.

American University law student Kimberly Tucker published a legal paper entitled "You Can't Wear That to Vote: The Constitutional-

ity of State Laws Prohibiting the Wearing of Political Message Buttons" in 2006 that argued against the restrictions.

"States cannot demonstrate a 'compelling state interest' in prohibiting the wearing of political message buttons in the polling place," she wrote. She also argued that the laws are far too broad and that the statutory language often permits "arbitrary enforcement."

Because of the wide latitude, says Arnwine, the best way is the safe way: "What is correct is that you may have to cover up and expose your Obama T-shirt once you go outside the designated voting zone."