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TARHEEL blue

by Matt Comer . Q-Notes staff

What a new, Democratic North Carolina means for the LGBT community

President Barack Obama. Governor Beverly Perdue. Senator Kay Hagan. What do all these names have in common? For LGBT North Carolinians, one thing is for sure: the slate of leaders elected by North Carolina voters are among the most LGBT-friendly candidates ever chosen to lead the U.S. and the Tar Heel State.

"Tar Heel blue" takes on a new meaning this year. It's not just a color. It's not just a symbol for a state of mind or the nation's oldest public university. For the first time since Jimmy Carter's 1976 election, the Republican red Tar Heel State has turned back to its blue, blue roots.

"I think it is really encouraging to see our state voting for the most pro-equality president in the history of our country and to be sending a great, state legislative ally to represent us in the U.S. Senate," says Ian Palmquist, executive director of the statewide LGBT advocacy group EqualityNC. "We have a new governor and we're really pleased that some of the pro-equality legislative seats that were vulnerable were able to hold on."

EqualityNC endorsed a total of 59 candidates at local and state levels. According to post-election results, 50 of those 59 were able to hold onto their seats or get elected for the first time.

Kay Hagan's triumphant and resounding victory over incumbent Republican U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Dole is nothing short of a loud and decisive judgment on Dole's failed service to her constituency. A full-time resident of Washington, D.C., Dole's preferred mode of representation looked more like England's idea of representation for the colonials than a true "servant of the people" model that's supposed to be indicative of American-style Democracy.

I'm sure dear old Jesse Helms is spinning in his grave. From right inside the gates of Hell, I can see the old man holding his first post-mortem press conference.

"The Democrats and that godless Kay

Hagan will ruin America," he'd say. "Just like Chapel Hill and that horrible, liberal zoo of a college, Greensboro and Kay Hagan's home need to be fenced in!"

The backlash from Dole's spineless TV ad attacking Hagan's "godlessness" was the least of the Senator's worries. Her lack of constituent service (and the rudeness of it, according to many of her "subjects") coupled with her miserable service as head of the National Republican Senatorial Committee left her stranded. Support withdrawn from the top down and loyalty stripped from the hearts of her conservative Republican voters, Dole was destined to lose.

Even my arch-conservative, Southern Baptist family voted against Dole. "She don't serve us," one of my aunts said before the election. "She's too busy partying in Washington."

Dole's campaign was doomed from the get-go. She could have saved herself bucketloads of time and money. Instead, she chose lies and deceit. Like many of her GOP colleagues, she'd rather give into strong-arming and stealing her way into elected office than through a clean and civil campaign.

Dole's underhanded campaign against Hagan was a scene nowhere to be seen in the Western Piedmont. Despite all odds — with only three months of campaigning and little-to-no campaign cash — openly gay Wade Boyles managed to keep his race against incumbent Republican N.C. House Rep. Dale Folwell (74-Forsyth) focused on the issues. Not once did Folwell use Boyles' sexual orientation against him and hardly ever did it come up among voters. Both candidates remained friendly through the race.

Despite losing to him by a 56-41 percent margin, Boyles extols the virtues of Folwell. He said he wants to take the politician to dinner. "I just don't understand how such a nice man can be for so many anti-gay things," Boyles says. "What's the deal?"

The fact that Boyles lost his race isn't a surprise; the 74th N.C. House District is a con-

servative, Republican-leaning one. The real surprise is that an openly gay, virtually unknown man with less than three months campaign time was able to pull off a margin as big as he did.

"I was very proud of the votes I received," he says. "When I started the campaign more than 10 weeks ago, I said to my campaign manager that I'd be happy if I just got 30 percent of the votes."

There's no doubt Boyles was just one of many Democrats who got a down-ticket pick-me-up from Obama's successful, North Carolina ground game. Obama won North Carolina and with it came an influx of Democratic support for candidates up and down the ballot.

For the most part, the N.C. General Assembly was able to hold on to its Democratic majority. Only one seat went to the Republicans. The moderate-leaning margin will serve as a buffer against the Religious Right's attempts next session to bully their dominionist agenda into the state's constitution.

After their anti-gay marriage amendment "victories" in Arizona, California and Florida — as well as the passage of a gay adoption ban in Arkansas — you can count on groups like the Family Research Council, Focus on the Family and the American Family Association to pour their resources into vulnerable states like ours. There's even talk of a renewed ballot initiative in Massachusetts, where marriage equality has been the law of the land since 2003.

Five years in the running, North Carolina remains the only Southern state without a constitutional ban on gay marriage. We're like a huge, gaping hole in the Religious Right's map. Every Southern state has become the victim of the Right's aim on civil rights and individual liberty, except for North Carolina.

A blue North Carolina means increased organizing potential and untapped political capital for ensuring the state's continued success at keeping an amendment at bay.

Harnessing that energy won't be easy, but it will be key to keeping North Carolina's constitution hate-free.

"I think it is really important to try to capture and to continue to engage the volunteers and donors who stepped up this year and who haven't been involved before," says Palmquist. "We'll certainly be doing that this year."

Last year, LGBT advocates missed their chance at passing a statewide anti-bullying bill by only one vote. Palmquist and EqualityNC have placed the anti-bullying legislation at the top of their priority list.

Meanwhile, conservative religious forces aligned with groups like the American Family Association have already drawn up their post-election action plans. In a post on their website just days after the election, the Christian Action League of North Carolina said they'd work to defeat the safe schools bill and work as hard as ever to push through their anti-gay marriage amendment.

The heavy push-back from the Right will make it more difficult for pro-equality advocates to make headway in Raleigh. Palmquist sees hope in new progressive support from voters who didn't grow up in North Carolina.

"I think, overall, North Carolina is slowly becoming a more moderate, more progressive state," Palmquist says. "A lot of that has to do with how many people are moving here from other places every year."

LGBT North Carolinians will have to count on these liberal and progressive newcomers if they hope to have any chance of

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