

First in Line

By Mark Lawton, Teacher, Author, Expert Napper

"We're first in line," Robert says. Line, I think. It's not much of a line with only two people in it.

"Oh," I say. "Do you think this is where the line will be?"

Naomi, Robert's fourteen-year old daughter, looks at me. Tilts her head and looks up at her dad. "Definitely," he says. "We walked all around the perimeter. Twice in fact," he says. "And we asked a guy over there," he says. Robert points toward the platform where the television cameras will be.

It's hard to see past the platform because the sun hasn't come up yet. There's a clearing on the other side where the homeless guys are waking up. Hundreds of metal barricades form a thin aisle up to the stage. "It doesn't seem like this is for the public," I say. Naomi looks at me and then to her dad again. "No. This is definitely the line," Robert says. "And we're first in it."

I look towards the clearing again. Some guys are moving cables around. "I think I'll take a walk around," I say.

I make my way to the clearing and start asking questions. I walk up to the cable guy. "I just got hired today," he says. "Ask the guy over there." The guy over there is wearing a hat that says "Don't blame me, I don't vote." This doesn't look promising, I think. "Excuse me," I say. "Do you know where I should stand to be first in line." The guy yanks the cable, tilts his hat back, says: "I don't see no lines yet."

I understand why he doesn't vote.

"Okay, I'll just look around." I give serious consideration to asking the homeless guys but can't bring myself to do it. By now the sun is showing up for the rally. I'm in the middle of the clearing. I hear the

homeless guys coughing and spitting. I walk over to the edge of the clearing and open my newspaper. My wife had said "You should take something to read. You'll be waiting a long time." On the front page, "Colin Powell..." I sit down on the pavement next to the clearing. Put my head down ready to concentrate.

A woman with a neon orange shirt shouts "Follow me" as she walks by fast. She's carrying a clipboard. Five others, also in neon orange, struggle to keep up. Pied piper. Their shirts all say 'Another IEUB member for Kerry.' IEUB? The woman holds her clipboard up in the air with her right hand, looks back over her left shoulder. Stops. Turns around. Addresses her charges. "Listen," she says. "I'm from New York. I've been to hundreds of rallies. We've got to be aggressive." She turns back around and leads them into the empty clearing. They stop to ask the first cable guy. I see him point to the other cable guy. She switches the clipboard to her left hand and picks up speed. Her charges break into a jog. I look back down at my recommended reading. "Colin Powell..." The ground's a bit wet so I put the living arts section under my butt. I look up and see the woman and the gang of five stalled at the second cable guy. The guy tilts his 'I don't vote' hat up again. I see him pointing at me. Next thing I know the woman is leading the entourage toward me. I put my head down again. Pretend to be reading. "Colin Powell says:...."

Damn they're coming right at me. Keep the head down. Damn, still coming. "Hey bud," the woman says. "We're getting in line right behind you." I look up. Their neon orange shirts make me squint. "Well," I say. "It's not really a line, but I'm waiting here until I know where to go."

The charges catch their breath and look at the woman. "Don't give me that ," she says. "I'm from New York. This is where the line will be."

It's 6AM in Portland, Oregon and I'm getting the I'm from New York routine. I look back down at my newspaper. A few deep breaths. Just keep pretending to read. They'll go away or at least get behind

me in line. The line in which I'm apparently first. "Hey," she says. "You're reading the New York Times, you can't be all bad." I look up at her. My butt is getting wet even through the living arts section. My cold wet butt makes me bite my lower lip. She mistakes it for a smile. "My name's Karen," she says. Puts her hand out and down for a shake. I'm sitting cross-legged with my feet on the headline of the living arts. "I'm Mark," I say. Karen's clipboard hand is cold. "Sorry," she says. "It's just that I'm from New York and I know that you gotta be aggressive at these things or you'll never even get close to the fucking candidate." Fucking candidate? Is this a Bush rally or a Kerry rally?

Karen spends the next half hour repeating the same instructions over and over. "We've gotta spread out. Increases the chances for an up-close. Never let anyone cut. Maintain eye-contact. Don't leave for the bathroom. Hold your position."

By seven-o'clock a modest line has formed behind me and I'm gaining some kind of status. "Is this line the line for ticket holders or to get tickets?" They ask.

"I'm just waiting here until I know where to wait," I say.

Karen and the Portland five have settled in comfortably behind me. They're exchanging stories, reviewing their strategies, and not revealing to anybody the meaning of IBEU. Slowly they start to let people into their little club.

Jack is number seven in line. Behind me, Karen, and the Portland five. By now the line is more like a blob and Jack uses it to his advantage. He works himself up into position two - right beside Karen. I keep my head down as much as possible. I do a great job on my pretend reading. I'm so worried that I'm waiting in the wrong place that I can't read more than a word at a time. "Colin Powell says: The..."

Jack's got political pins and buttons on his blue-jean jacket. Says to Karen, "In 1974, I was in the fifth row of P.F's Dark Side of the Moon Tour." P.F?

Karen holds her clipboard out in front her. Shows it to Jack. Bangs her palm on it. "The key," she says. " is organization and an aggressive attitude."

Jack takes out his wallet. Shows Karen a worn photo. "That's me and my kid brother in the parking lot right before the concert. It was awesome."

Karen points towards the cable guy in the clearing. "We consulted that guy over there." Consulted? "He instructed us to fall in behind Mark." Fall in?

Jack walks out in front of what has now become my line. I keep my head down. Keep pretend reading. "Colin Powell says: The situation..."

"Hey," he says. "I'm Jack. You did an awesome job forming this line." Forming, I think. All I did was sit down.

I stall. Keep pretending.

"You're Mark, right?" He says. He's onto me.

I'm still sitting cross-legged. My legs are stiff. I stand up. Big mistake. Jack starts in. "Really dude. This is so awesome being in the front of the line. In 1974, I was in the fifth row of P.F's Dark Side of the Moon tour."

I start fluffing my NY Times. Try to figure out how I can use it.

"P.F?" I ask.

"Dude, Yeah. Pink Floyd. Me and my kid brother were in the fifth, fucking, row."

I stretch my arms. I look past Jack into the clearing. The secret service are there now walking back and forth. Looking secret. Doing service. The homeless guys have all been shuttled out.

"Looks like they're getting ready to let us in," I say.

Jack pats me on the shoulder. Says, "you would know."

I look over to the stage where Kerry will speak. Beside it are the hundreds of metal barricades where I met Robert and Naomi. They're still standing there. All alone. Robert sees me. Taps Naomi on shoulder. Points at me. Me and my line that is now hundreds deep. They're both tapping their feet. Shuffling in place. Robert's sweating. Jack sees them and waves at them to come over. They start running. It's a long run around the barricades. Robert's got a full political sweat going by the time he arrives. He's got Naomi by the wrist. When he lets go of it she brings it up in front of her face. She's pissed. Just about to cry.

"Hey, Naomi," I say. "How you doin'?"

Robert wipes the sweat from his head to his arm. Says, "I definitely thought that was the right line. Definitely."

I pat him on the back. Big mistake. My hand gets all wet. "Who knows what's going on here," I say. "Everybody says something different about the line, the tickets, this definitely is much worse than a concert."

Jack introduces himself to Robert and Naomi. Then introduces Karen and the Portland five. Now that he knows everybody and since he was in his line since 5:30, Robert decides that he gets to join us at the front of my line.

Jack says, "Make yourself comfortable. Any friend of Mark is a friend of mine." Friend? Jack's the self-appointed event organizer. Karen may be aggressive but Jack's got people skills.

Eleven-thirty. Kerry is nowhere in sight but the metal detectors are all set up. I make some strategic observations. There's one secret service guy who seems to be in charge. The others seem like day laborer secret service. Their dark sunglasses even seem temporary. It's time to make a move.

I get up and fold my NY Times under my arm. Leave the wet living arts section on the floor. I walk away. Nobody notices except Naomi who waves her red wrist at me.

I walk to the other side of the metal detectors. I sit down and despite reservations that I've just moved from the front of the right line to a meaningless location, I try to read again. "Colin Powell says: The situation in..."

Then, I see Karen, Jack, Robert, Naomi, and the Portland Five coming toward me. Jack arrives first. Since I saw him last he's acquired another pin for his jacket. "Somebody less dumb for president," it says.

"Mark," he says. "Are you sure this is the right place?"

We're old friends now and I can't ignore him. I stand up. I look at him and the others. "I really have no idea," I say.

They all look at each other. Jack stamps his feet up and down. His mouth is moving but no words are coming out. Then he says, "I'm sticking with Mark." The others pause. Then, "Me too's" and "He was right last time" come in from all sides. Right last time?

Noon: By now there's thousands of people in the line behind me. Across from us there are thousands in my last line. The lines are pointing at one another. Everybody's nervous they're in the wrong one. The police are holding people back. The lines are shouting things like: "This sucks" and "Incompetence reigns" and "This is stupider than Bush."

The police are noticeably worried there's going to be a rush. Jack taps me on the shoulder. Whispers in my ear: "Mark, the P.F. tour in '74 was my last one. I almost got trampled getting to the fifth row. It was awesome but too fucking dangerous."

The day laborer secret service and the police all gather around the official secret service guy. They're getting instructions. Then, they all start walking towards the other line. They're waving their arms and yelling. Be calm, walk slowly to the other line. You're in the wrong line. When Jack, Karen, Robert, Naomi and the Portland five hear the good news they start cheering, whooping it up and yelling hoorays. Then, they start a chant: "Mark was right. Mark was right. Mark was right." Wow, I really am a natural born leader. This fifteen minutes of fame is getting better by the minute.

One o'clock: After the two lines have merged into one, the cops and the secret service guys open the gates. Jack, Karen, Robert, Naomi, the Portland five, and I all make a two-hundred yard sprint back to the stage where I started eight hours earlier. We all end up right next to each other. Front row. Jack and I are ecstatic. "Mark, dude," he says. "This is just like P.F.'s 1974 Dark Side of The Moon tour. I was in the fifth row then dude." Jack's pumping his fists up in the air. "Now, I'm in the first, fucking, row."

By two o'clock I've made it through the first two sentences of the article. "Colin Powell says: The situation in Iraq is a quagmire." The speakers are blaring songs by Bruce Springsteen. All my cynicism of my new found friends has worn off. I'm one of them now. Jack, Karen, Robert, Naomi, the Portland Five and I - we've got a bond.

We're all one. I'm yelling things like: "Dude, this is way cooler than P.F.'s Dark Side of the Moon." and "J.K. - all the way." I'm a convert now - a participate in the great American political process.