



BE LIKE THE 'TRIFECTA OF AWESOME'

Be brave! Start political conversations.

BY AMANDA MENAS

Music teacher Dan Foose, special education teacher Justin Kern, and math teacher Charles "Chuck" Ronco work in Prince William County Public Schools in Virginia. The Virginia Education Association (VEA) refers to them as the "Trifecta of Awesome," because they regularly canvass their county to discuss issues and pro-public education candidates with voters.

What has inspired you to become politically active?

Dan: I had been teaching about 14 years when I attended my first VEA Representative Assembly. I wanted to get more involved, and thought I'd give canvassing a try during the gubernatorial campaign. What I learned is that elections are won through conversations, not one-sided communication like ads.

Chuck: I signed up for VEA's Reggie Smith Organizing School, where I discovered my interest in the data part of politics. I learned about the VAN [Voter Activation Network] and overnight I locked myself in my room and learned to use it. Elections are not random. It's not just a roll of the dice or a popularity contest. A week or two later I knocked on my first door.

Justin: About 10 years ago, I met Dan Foose through social media, and he kept saying, "You gotta come out, you have a lot of passion." I was a little nervous about canvassing, but he finally convinced me that I had to do something with action not just words.

How has all this organizing paid off?

Dan: We now have a friendly school board that is listening to our concerns. They've begun to reduce class sizes, and we had our first salary step and cost of living increase together that we've had in about 10 years. We added sexual orientation and gender identity to the non-discrimination clause.

Chuck: Our school faculty got the school board to pass a resolution to direct millions of dollars to the schools across our district that work with economically disadvantaged students and have older facilities.

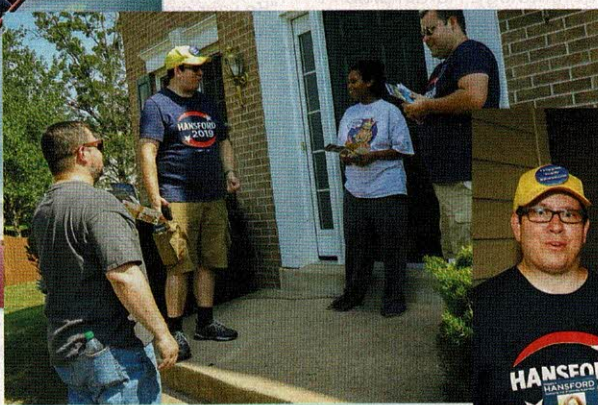
Justin: I am so proud of being part of the collective advocacy of educators around the country. We've changed the narrative about public education so much from what it was in 2010. We have a solid foundation and now we're starting to build.

What's your advice to other educators who are ready to knock on doors?

Chuck: You have an enormous amount of street credibility as an educator. I like to say, "I'm a teacher. Here's some information, and as the teacher I get to tell you to do your homework." I get more mileage out of that statement than any other.

Dan: If the person at the door asks something you're not sure about, that's okay. When we're canvassing we have our clipboards and take copious notes so the campaign can get back to the voter with information.

Justin: Work on having quality conversations, not just the number of doors knocked. It's a pleasant surprise to see that people will accept you at 10 a.m. on a Saturday to talk about issues that are important to them. 🇺🇸



The "Trifecta of Awesome"—Daniel Foose, Chuck Ronco, and Justin Kern (left to right, far right photo)—earned the moniker by canvassing year-round for pro-public education candidates.

PHOTOS: LUIS GOMEZ

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