

CAMBRIDGE

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## 'Blue' has street cred, politically Performance artists brings issues to a vote

By Robin Nixon, Globe Correspondent | July 15, 2007

A ballot box sits perched on an adult-size tricycle. A man with long brown hair calls out, inviting passersby to come closer. Some do, hesitantly.

A sign asks, "Time to Stop the War?" The ballot box has a slot for "Yes " and a slot for "No." The choice is yours.

This summer, Thomas "Blue" Newell is celebrating his 15th year as the operator of the "only practice ballot box in the country."

The self-described performance artist sets up his star-spangled ballot box almost daily, year-round, in front of Hidden Sweets in Harvard Square. The hand made construction gives people the chance to practice voting on -- depending on the day -- a variety of issues such as the war in Iraq and the legalization of hemp. Blue is happy to provide a civics lesson in the process.

In addition to voting, Newell offers his "hippie karaoke," during which passersby can sing songs of peace, or from their childhood, into a microphone, with Blue accompanying. On most Sundays, there are multiple renditions of "Where Have All the Flowers Gone." "Puff the Magic Dragon" is also a popular choice.

At moments like these, Newell can imagine he has achieved his goal of reviving the Age of Aquarius in Harvard Square.

Blue, who graduated from North Quincy High School in 1968, remembers free concerts behind Harvard Stadium, watching the likes of Janis Joplin perform, and taking part in demonstration after demonstration. He remembers political discussions arising spontaneously on the streets of Cambridge.

"Now there is nothing, just a total waste of space," he says, gesturing to disparate groups hanging out or walking by the Harvard Square T stop.

To cast a vote at Blue's polling place, a person inserts money into the small, square cups built into the ballot box.

"We vote with our money in America," a sign says. Or as Blue puts it, "Companies reach into your pocket; take your money and control the government with it."

But the ballot box is not about making money. He often leaves the booth unattended while he grabs a coffee or runs an errand. "If someone steals from me, they needed it more than I do," he says with a shrug.

When his finances are low, Blue sings nursery rhymes with children, and parents provide tips by tossing money into a top hat. But even then, sharing his politics is his first priority. "I am singing to the kids and throwing the politics out over their heads," he says.

Encouraging a child to make one of his puppets sing, he points out its transparent arms and jokes that they are "nuclear." "Be the Karl Rove of Harvard Square; play with the nuclear arms," he calls out.

Blue was the third born in a family of five boys. His father was a Nazarene preacher and his mother, until 1999, a newspaper writer and editor at The Patriot Ledger. Blue is now their primary care giver. He takes the

train to Weymouth to monitor their health, their medications, and their doctor s' appointments.

By the age of 14, Blue had adopted a "hippie" lifestyle, he says, "running off across the country at least three times between '65 and '68." He took to college in fits and starts and eventually graduated from Bridgewater State College in 1986 with a degree in communications.

He got his nickname when he had oral surgery at age 20 and chose a blue tooth for a replacement. Friends started calling him Blue Tooth, and eventually shortened it to Blue. When he had all of his teeth removed at age 40, he had a full set of blue teeth, but today uses a white set.

In his early 20s, he became a father. As a result, he shelved some of his political activism and focused on supporting his two daughters with odd jobs, such as working in construction and driving trucks. Now in their 30s, one daughter lives in Salem, the other in Central Square. He grins as he announces that his first grandson arrived two months ago. His other grandchild is 12.

But once his children were raised, and the bills were less, he came right back to the Square -- to his message and way of life, this time for good.

Gina Geraci, a former performance painter, remembers Blue affectionately. "He has been there forever," said Geraci, who is in her early 30s. She described Blue as a part of the family dynamic that exists among Harvard Square street performers. Of her former profession, Geraci, now a clinical science researcher focusing on renal function, misses what Blue holds most dear -- "living in the now" and "off the grid."

The way Blue explains it, his jokes, songs, and political commentary encourage adults to find their inner child - or their inner hippie.

"A hippie is just a child. And every child is a hippie, because they are free," he says. "I am free. . . . I am able to stay a child until I am 70, 80."

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