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SNAPSHOT

PORTRAIT

A moment in the life of the community

Highly acclaimed 'political junk mail'

Carrboro political consultant wins national award for work in presidential campaign.

By **DAVE HART**
Staff Writer

CARRBORO— Thomas Mills has no illusions about what happens to much of the work he does.

"Most of it gets thrown away," said Mills, a Carrboro-based political consultant whose firm, The Campaign Network, specializes in direct-mail campaigns. "It's what most folks call junk mail, political junk mail."

Most, maybe, but not all. Two weeks ago, the American Association of Political Consultants awarded The Campaign Network nine 2005 Polle Awards for Excellence in Political Communications.

Mills and his business partner, Jim Spencer of Boston, pulled off a near-sweep in the high-

profile category of best direct-mail campaign for the Democratic Candidate in the General Presidential Election. The Campaign Network, which has offices in Boston and Carrboro, netted three of the four prizes in that category, including first place for a mail campaign built around the phrase, "George Bush, You're Fired!"

The Polle Awards capped a big year for Mills and his firm. Last year The Campaign Network founded the Draft Kerry-Edwards.com movement, provided podium security at the Democratic National Convention and coordinated mail for both the presidential race and the governor's race in New Hampshire.

New Hampshire, as it turned out, was the only state in the nation to switch from red in 2000 to blue in 2004, and the Democratic gubernatorial candidate, John Lynch, came from behind to defeat the incumbent Republican governor, Craig Benson.

Not a bad year's work for a guy you can find

many mornings eating breakfast at Weaver Street Market.

"It was a really big year for us," Mills said. "The Draft Kerry-Edwards movement took off, and it was really exciting watching the race go the way it did in New Hampshire. Then to win the Polle Awards, for a small firm like ours, that was a big deal. This business is dominated by some very large firms, most of them based in Washington, D.C. You don't see many of them in places like Carrboro."

Mills, the son of Superior Court Judge Fetzer Mills and the nephew of former state legislator Fritz Mills, grew up in a household where the dinner table conversation more often than not revolved around politics. A native of Wadesboro, he graduated from UNC and has worked in politics for nearly 20 years, working with candidates and issues on local, state and national stages.

He and Spencer, a 30-year political veteran and the president of Tn Campaign Network, began last year focused on the Iowa Democratic primary. After Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry won, and North Carolina Sen. John Edwards finished second there, many in the party began calling for a Kerry-Edwards ticket.

Mills and Spencer founded a Web site, draftkerryedwards.com, to help focus that call.

"We didn't want to see a prolonged fight for the nomination, so we started the Draft Kerry-Edwards movement," Mills said. "There were a lot of things pointing that way. Jim is based in Massachusetts, and I'm here in North Carolina, and this all came together just

after the Super Bowl, where New England was playing Carolina. Everything fit."

Indeed it did, and Kerry chose Edwards as his running mate. The Democratic National Committee selected The Campaign Network as one of seven firms nationwide coordinating mail campaigns, and also hired the firm to run interference for the candidates at the Democratic Convention.

"At a convention, you have all these powerful people who want to get close to the even more powerful people," Mills said. "And you can't have that, because you'd just have a mob scene back there. So when, say, a senator came up and said, 'I need to get back there and see so-and-so,' and they didn't have the proper credentials, our job was to smile and act nice and steer them away. They couldn't have gotten there, because the Secret Service was backing us

up, but our job was to keep them from reaching the Secret Service guys. We were the first line of defense.

"And what was so great about that, for me, was that it got us the highest level of pass there was. I got to meet Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, people like that."

Meanwhile, Spencer and Mills were working on the mail campaigns, brainstorming ideas and conducting market research for New Hampshire. The pieces they produced were large illustrated mailings with punchy messages, usually targeted toward specific audiences. Pieces criticizing President Bush's health care policies, for example, might be directed toward elderly voters.

"We had a lot of masters," Mills said. "The Democratic National Committee, the New Hampshire Democratic Party, the Kerry-Edwards campaign

people. Everything we did had to be approved.

"We knew our stuff was at the top of its game. In focus group testing, our stuff tested higher than anybody else's, so we knew we were doing top-notch work."

Election Day, Mills said, was a good news-bad news story. He watched the returns come in from two arenas: the national one, and the New Hampshire one. Things in the Granite State went well, but in the end, of course, the American people declined to fire George W. Bush. They re-hired him for another four years.

"It was a big letdown," Mills said. "I was pretty disappointed. But I believe in the system, and I believe it will correct itself. You have to take the long view."

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