

Blue Dreaming at the Warren Debate Watch Party

A Letter from Hillsborough

[December 24, 2019](#)

Annie, the Hillsborough NC Community Team Leader for the Warren campaign, welcomed me to the Elizabeth Warren Debate Watch Party at the Churton Grove Homeowner Association clubhouse. Annie and her husband were living on a boat when Trump won in 2016 and she was so sick, she told me, "that we couldn't set sail the next day. You know, steering a ship takes focus."

I told her I wanted to find out what Warren supporters in my small town are feeling about the Senator's chances of winning the nomination and the general election. I always posit that in North Carolina, the swingiest of the swing states, if you take the temperature here in little Hillsborough, you can find out if the rest of the state's got a fever.

"You *have* to talk to Doug," Annie said, handing me a nametag and a Debate Bingo scorecard.

"But first, have something to eat." She showed me to the well-laden buffet where goat cheese, vegan crackers, and IPAs vied for space with brownies, holiday cookies, and sweet tea.

Fifteen people attended and, for a town of 7,500, that's pretty good. The majority was boomer, white, well-educated, and non-native to the state. Men and women were there in about equal numbers. There were two shy young people, including one who'd brought his Warren-curious mother, and one person of color from Mebane. It was the only public Debate Watch party for

any candidate in town.

Gerrymandered NC ,where Trump won by 3.2 percentage points in 2016, is hard to win for any progressive, or even centrist, Democrat. Outside of the Charlotte, Fayetteville, and Greensboro, and Raleigh metropolitan areas, the Tar Heel state's pretty much cherry red except for a swathe of indigo in the heavily African American central eastern part of state. NC has a Democratic Governor, but a GOP supermajority in the legislature, an antiquated voting system, spanking-new voter ID laws, and generally low voter turnouts. 2016 was a rare bump in the scope of North Carolina's past half-century: uncharacteristically, [64% of Tar Heels cast a ballot in the Presidential election](#).

But back to Doug. "Who's Doug?" I asked.

Annie guided me over to a stout 61-year-old man in a prison-orange sweater whose bona fides range from East Coast coordinator for the Jerry Brown campaign to North Carolina chair for the Green Party and the Ralph Nader campaign (2000). A polymath — musician, poet, journalist, English professor — Doug bristles with smarts and passion. He was a Sanders guy in 2016 and, like other Sanders supporters at the party, he's still resentful that the DNC "marginalized" his candidate in the primaries that year.

But isn't Bernie a bit old to be electable now? I asked. And that heart attack...?

"Look, I'm Warren all the way," Doug said, "and if she's not the nominee, then it would be great if she was on the ticket, with *anyone*." He paused and checked the TV screen over the big brick fireplace to see if it was debate time yet.

"Look, I'm not sure anyone can beat 45, unless he's removed from office and the race is against Pence instead," he continued. "The Democratic Party has been warped by its own National Committee, a group of 'centrists' that are anything *but*," he continued, citing hawkish policies under Democratic administrations since Carter and the Clinton economic and social policies that

backfired on labor and people of color. "Until the progressive wing gets control of the DNC, nothing is likely to push a progressive candidate into winning [the nomination]... so many southern democrats will *not* vote for progressives."

I left Doug on the couch and talked with other partygoers. Many were fretting that Sanders and Warren will cancel each other out if they both remain in the race. All of them prioritize the climate crisis, healthcare, terminating the endless wars, a skyrocketing national debt, and racial and economic injustice. Words they use to describe Warren are qualified, decent, smart, prepared, and dependable.

"She's a good teacher," said Annie. "She knows how to explain complex issues."

Mary, a dues-paying Churton Grove HOA member who booked the clubhouse for the evening, is a 68-year-old career Army nurse-midwife with the sharp grandma look of a Barbara Bush. "Hooah!" she growled, grinning at me. She's lived all over the world and has a professional resume as long as my body. Mary talked about her priorities, the climate crisis chief among them. "Nothing else matters if our home is uninhabitable". For military families (her own is "impressed" with Warren) healthcare and personal decency count.

Mary thinks universal healthcare is a human right that must be disconnected from the profit motive. "I've had socialized medicine my whole life until now," she said. "I always got what I needed in the military without cost becoming an issue." She lost both her husband and son to suicide seven years apart, so to her the *quality* of healthcare is as great a concern as its cost. "Both had been in the health care system within the week" of their deaths, she said. "We have to make progress in mental health care so that no one has to feel that desperate and no families have to endure that loss."

The only native Tar Heel I could find at the party was Curtis, a soft-spoken 67-

year-old African- and Native-American man who is a retired IBM systems programmer. He lives in nearby Mebane and is weary of the "redneck" culture there. He blames Trump for giving "people license to express the [racist] feelings they already had." Curtis is firmly pro-Warren: "She makes the most common sense on the issues and is consistent", he said, adding that the idea a woman can't be Commander in Chief is "outdated". According to recent polls, 67.8 % of African American North Carolinians would vote for Biden [and 54.9 for Warren](#). Together, Curtis thinks, they'd take the state among people of color.

The debate passed with hoots and hollers for our candidate, more snacking, and raucous laughter at the one-liners. When Warren was giving her final comments, Annie took a group picture of us under the TV to tweet to the campaign. And when the debate was over, she showed us how to download [the Reach app](#) to canvas to our phones to "canvass for Elizabeth, wherever and whenever". Someone won Debate Bingo and got some Warren swag as a prize.

It was late. The 50-pounds of nonperishable food we'd collected for the local food pantry and a trunkful of new toys for Toys for Tots were wheeled out to someone's car. As some swept the floor and packed up leftovers, the rest of us went our separate ways into the dark night. We were tired.

But here's the question: can a progressive like Warren win in North Carolina? Yes, if.

Yes, if Trump is removed from office. Yes, if people of color and youth come out in *much* bigger numbers; and if a couple percentage points of Trump voters are disgusted enough to go blue.

Yes, if just 4% more people vote. Then, a Democratic Presidential candidate could take this battleground state. Young people 18-23 alone could make up

these numbers, but they need at least one real progressive to vote for. North Carolina continues to swell with new residents who bring their political consciousnesses from elsewhere with them.

But with confusing new voter ID rules and the GOP's taste for last-minute roll purges, it's going to take a whole lots of snacks, beer and, most of all, focus for a truly progressive Democratic ticket to steer their campaign to a win in North Carolina in 2020.

Dorothy Potter Snyder is a writer, editor and literary translator who lives in Hillsborough, NC. You can tweet with her [@DorothyPS](#).

Related Names: [Elizabeth Warren](#), [Hillsborough](#)