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# Unlikely Activist Who Got to the Tea Party Early

By [KATE ZERNIKE](#)

SEATTLE — Keli Carender has a pierced nose, performs improv on weekends and lives here in a neighborhood with more Mexican grocers than coffeehouses. You might mistake her for the kind of young person whose vote powered [President Obama](#) to the White House. You probably would not think of her as a Tea Party type.

But leaders of the Tea Party movement credit her with being the first.

A year ago, frustrated that every time she called her senators to urge them to vote against the \$787 billion stimulus bill their mailboxes were full, and tired of wearing out the ear of her Obama-voting fiancé, Ms. Carender decided to hold a protest against what she called the “porkulus.”

“I basically thought to myself: ‘I have two courses. I can give up, go home, crawl into bed and be really depressed and let it happen,’ ” she said this month while driving home from a protest at the State Capitol in Olympia. “Or I can do something different, and I can find a new avenue to have my voice get out.”

This weekend, as Tea Party members observe the anniversary of the first mass protests nationwide, Ms. Carender’s path to activism offers a lens into how the movement has grown, taking many people who were not politically active — it is not uncommon to meet Tea Party advocates who say they have never voted — and turning them into a force that is rattling both parties as they look toward the midterm elections in the fall.

Ms. Carender’s first rally drew only 120 people. A week later, she had 300, and six weeks later, 1,200 people gathered for a Tax Day Tea Party. Last month, she was among about 60 Tea Party leaders flown to Washington to be trained in election activism by [FreedomWorks](#), the conservative advocacy organization led by [Dick Armey](#), the former House Republican leader.

This month, a year to the day of her first protest, Ms. Carender stood among a crowd of about 600 on the steps of the State Capitol, acknowledging the thanks from a speaker who cited her as

the original Tea Party advocate. Around her were the now-familiar signs: “Can you hear us now?” “Is it 2012 yet?” “Tea Party: the party of now.”

Jenny Beth Martin, a national coordinator for [Tea Party Patriots](#), an umbrella organization of local groups that Ms. Carender has joined, calls her an unlikely avatar of the movement but an ideal one. She puts a fresh, idealistic face on a movement often dismissed as a bunch of angry extremists.

“She’s not your typical conservative,” she said. “She’s an actress. She’s got a nose ring. I think it’s the thing that’s so amazing about our movement.”

The daughter of Democrats who became disaffected in the Clinton years, Ms. Carender, 30, began paying attention to politics during the 2008 campaign, but none of the candidates appealed to her. She had studied math at Western Washington University before earning a teaching certificate at Oxford — she teaches basic math to adult learners — and began reading more on economics, particularly the writings of [Thomas Sowell](#), the libertarian economist, and [National Review](#).

Reading about the stimulus, she said, “it didn’t make any sense to me to be spending all this money when we don’t have it.”

“It seems more logical to me that we create an atmosphere where private industry can start to grow again and create jobs,” she said.

Her fiancé, Conor McNassar, urged her to channel her complaints into a blog, which she called [Liberty Belle](#).

“He didn’t mind hearing it,” she said. “He just couldn’t hear it all the time.”

It was not enough.

So she called the city parks department, which suggested a location and gave her a permit. She still did not know if any other protesters would show up.

She put out the word to some friends from the Young Republicans, which she had joined in late 2008, but it was not a big group. She called [Michael Medved](#), the Seattle-based conservative radio host, but he did not put her on the air. She scanned a list of economics professors who had signed a [Cato Institute](#) letter opposing the stimulus and found two locally, but they could not make it.

She also called someone she had met at an election results watch party, who agreed to spread the word among Republicans. She called a conservative local radio host, who put in a plug. And

she sent an e-mail message to the conservative writer [Michelle Malkin](#), who agreed to announce the protest on her blog and even sent some pulled pork to feed the crowd.

The porkulus protest did not draw enough people to finish the pulled pork, which Ms. Carender took to a homeless shelter. But she collected e-mail addresses, remembering that Senator [Barack Obama](#) had done that at events as he prepared to run for president.

The “tea party” label came three days later, from a rant the CNBC correspondent Rick Santelli delivered from the floor of the [Chicago Mercantile Exchange](#), and the nationwide protests followed.

Six weeks later, Ms. Carender’s e-mail list had grown to 1,000 — it is now 1,500 — allowing her to summon protesters on short notice and making her the model child of the Tea Party Patriots, which has since become a driving force for advocates nationwide with its weekly conference calls to coordinate Tea Party activity.

In her activism, Ms. Carender has also drawn on her theatrical experience. Discovering that advocates of a health care overhaul were marching in the city last summer, she staged a “funeral for health care,” with protesters wearing black and bagpipers playing. For her first Tea Party event, she dressed as Liberty Belle (newspaper accounts mistook her for Little Bo Peep).

In a video viewed 68,000 times on YouTube, she confronted Representative [Norm Dicks](#), Democrat of Washington, at a town-hall-style meeting on health care. “If you believe that it is absolutely moral to take my money and give it to someone else based on their supposed needs,” she said, waving a \$20 bill to boos and cheers, “then you come and take this \$20 and use it as a down payment on this health care plan.”

Ms. Carender is less certain when it comes to explaining, for instance, how to cut the deficit without cutting [Medicaid](#) and [Medicare](#).

“Well,” she said, thinking for a long time and then sighing. “Let’s see. Some days I’m very Randian. I feel like there shouldn’t be any of those programs, that it should all be charitable organizations. Sometimes I think, well, maybe it really should be just state, and there should be no federal part in it at all. I bounce around in my solutions to the problem.”

She, like many Tea Party members, resists the idea of a Tea Party leader — “there are a thousand leaders,” she says.

[Glenn Beck](#)? “He can be a Tea Partier, but it’s not like the movement bends to him.”

[Sarah Palin](#)? She will have to campaign on Tea Party ideas if she wants Tea Party support, Ms.

Carender said, adding, “And if she were elected, she’d have to govern on those principles or be fired.”

Ms. Carender herself has become a Tea Party leader, even a celebrity.

At the Olympia rally, she did a television interview and accepted a hug from Kirby Wilbur, the radio host who first publicized her porkulus protest. “This is the future of the conservative movement!” he declared upon seeing her.

Her biggest goal now, Ms. Carender said, is replacing Senator [Patty Murray](#), a Democrat elected three times by wide margins, in November.

So Ms. Carender held a small anniversary rally on Saturday at a local mall. But her focus is on vetting candidates and using the contacts she has established over the last year to get out the vote.

“There is no way we will out-fund-raise the liberals,” she said. “The only weapon we have is energy and time.”