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**Obama just can't help but shine;**

**Tries to stay humble but Downstate tour draws even Republicans**

By Dave McKinney

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URBANA -- Something completely impulsive swept over 19-year-old Noah Isserman Wednesday after he and his high school buddies heard Democrat Barack Obama tell a standing-room-only crowd why he wants to be Illinois' next U.S. senator.

The teens decided the moment called for a group hug -- and that's exactly what they heaped upon the surprised but accommodating state senator after his speech at the University of Illinois Student Union.

"We really like this guy," the Urbana teen beamed afterward. "He's certainly creating a buzz and a feeling of hope that hasn't been around much lately, particularly for those who couldn't vote in 2000 and who for the past four years have not been terribly happy about the direction our country has been going. To see people stepping up and who seem straightforward is just refreshing."

This was one snapshot from the midpoint of Obama's ambitious five-day swing Downstate, where he was scheduled to hit 10 cities Tuesday in a hectic schedule that could only be met by his three-vehicle caravan roaring along the interstates at an 80-mph clip. His wife, Michelle, and their children trailed far behind since the speedometer of their rented motor home topped out at 50 mph.

At Obama's various stops since Saturday, he has been afforded celebrity status by Democrats and even some Republicans after his breakthrough keynote speech last week before the Democratic National Convention and his appearances on national news programs like "Meet the Press."

On schoolyards and in musty-smelling town halls, voters are comparing him to their pastor, marveling at his good looks, transferring change from their pockets into his hand -- he picked up $2 that way Tuesday -- and urging him on to greener political pastures even before he has earned his promotion from the Illinois Statehouse to the U.S. Senate.

"Barack is even better than John Kennedy," said retired schoolteacher Jane Spires, a Democrat from Decatur who watched Obama speak Monday in Clinton.

"He just smacks of sincerity. I feel like he's a real person. I like the fact he isn't blaming everything on the Republicans. I like the fact he's a person who seems to be trying to bring America together, not be divisive. And I like how he talks in a normal tone of voice, not shouting and screaming."

Despite such heady talk, Obama appeared intent wherever he went to leave the clear impression that all of the attention has not inflated his head like a beach ball, defining himself as a "workhorse not a showhorse."

Speaking to an audience at Lake Land Community College in Mattoon, Obama provoked laughter when he said his barnstorming tour was designed to "make sure that people know I haven't gone Hollywood on them."

"I know who's going to take care of me after all the hoopla and the hype passes. It's going to be the voters of Illinois. I want to spend time with you," he told that crowd. "That'll keep me grounded, along with my wife, who'll tease me and tell me my ears look really big on TV."

A political unknown just 18 months ago, Obama has created a movement, even within heavily Republican areas that favored George W. Bush four years ago and that Obama didn't carry in last spring's Democratic primary.

That was apparent when he showed up Tuesday in tiny Tuscola, a town 170 miles south of Chicago. Bush won Douglas County over Democrat Al Gore by a 60 percent to 40 percent margin in 2000. Obama's caravan was escorted into town by two flag-waving military vehicles of World War II vintage.

"You need to run for president in the next election," retired farmer Boyd Stenger told Obama as he extended his hand to the candidate following a speech the senator delivered to about 100 people in a town known for its broom corn and nearby Amish population.

Stenger, a 66-year-old resident of neighboring Arthur, voted for Bush nearly four years ago and said he has his mind made up on Obama after watching his televised speech last week. "I think he means what he says," Stenger said, standing in the shadow of the town's spire-like grain elevators.

Across the street, Annessa Norman took a break from her workout routine in a storefront gym, appearing mesmerized by Obama's charisma. Like Stenger, she voted for Bush in 2000. She said she is weighing whether to support the 42-year-old Obama.

"I was sitting here saying how cute he was," the 29-year-old Tuscola woman and hunting enthusiast laughed. "He's a younger guy, you know."

Of course, the pro-Obama sentiment visible from all sides of the political spectrum is helped by the GOP's failure so far to field a credible candidate who can sling arrows at Obama's left-of-center voting record and blunt the stunning amount of positive press he has gotten.

Despite not having an opponent, Obama dodged questions about whether he thinks there is any conceivable way he could lose this race during its remaining three months.

"You know, politics is just so strange," he told the Sun-Times in an interview shortly before visiting Neoga, a farming community that has never hosted anyone of Obama's political caliber. "Nobody could have foreseen the situation I'm in now. So don't jinx me."

Obama originally had penciled in an appearance Saturday at the gravesite of Norma Jean, an elephant that was buried decades ago when the circus came through the northwestern Illinois town of Oquawka and unexpectedly lost one of its star attractions.

Had Obama's visit not been scrapped because of time constraints, it would have served as an unusually apt metaphor for this campaign where -- for the moment -- the political party symbolized by the animal appears all but dead.