

# Conley sets sights on helping A-Team to victory

By Samuel McKewon

Senior editor

He lost. So just how long do you want the last chapter to be? It's fade-out time.

John Conley heard it from a few directions on just why it happened in the ASUN student elections on March 1. Not greek enough. Didn't attack enough. Should have exposed Empower presidential candidate Heath Mello. So on. So on.

No plays left in Conley's bag. Except one. Two days after the election, Conley expounds on everything — his trickle-down theory, the Daily Nebraskan influence and the resurgence of A-Team, a party sans the comforts of his own party or Empower's. A party that he figures has little chance of victory after Empower nearly won the election outright. "They've got a small chance," Conley says. "Not much."

He is still stunned by the back-room pleas from Duff executive candidates and Impact's second vice president, Amy Ellis, whom Conley says was just reacting to the moment.

"She saw some sign earlier that day about A-Team wanting to blow up the university," Conley says.

But Ellis is still the best candidate for the second vice president job, he says, and Conley figures she's got a good chance of upsetting

Empower's Mike Butterfield, even though she squeaked into the run-off.

"Amy knows who to go to for support," Conley says. "And she knows she can work with either (A-Team president) Joel Schafer or Mr. Mello. Amy can work with anyone."

Conley would rather Ellis work with Schafer. Two days after the election, he says he will publicly support Schafer in a letter to the Daily Nebraskan. He has told all Impact supporters to do the same.

And sure enough, the letter is delivered the next Monday, two days before the run-off.

"Go ahead and read it," Conley says.

Integrity is word No. 26. Honest is word No. 19. Ethics, No. 28.

They describe A-Team and Schafer. The letter mentions neither Mello nor Empower. Even at the end, Conley holds back on attacking.

The letter runs the next day.

The day after, A-Team wins.

How much did Conley influence

the results? Impossible to tell. Conley himself does not know. In the eyes of the Empower party, his influence likely pales in the wake of the Daily Nebraskan.

Conley acknowledges the Daily Nebraskan shaped some opinions. More important were the ads A-Team placed in the paper.

"So it got people talking," Conley says, imitating students who were seeing the ads for the first time. "Did you see that Fidel Castro ad?"

What were those guys thinking?"

"The thing is, it got people thinking."

All combined, the final week saw a 478-vote turnaround. Empower had fewer votes than it did in the general election. A-Team had 384 more. In total, A-Team won by a comfortable margin of 224 votes.

As for Conley, he will move on, largely unaffected. He wants to stay involved with ASUN but not immersed. He says he is done with the residence assistant position.

"I said I'd give them two years," Conley says. "I gave them two years."

He may go to Mexico this summer to fulfill a Spanish requirement to graduate. And next year, he will concentrate on taking classes and, eventually, graduation.

The plan is set.

And he doesn't worry

too much about how he lost, why he lost. In Conley's view, not much went wrong with the campaign.

"We didn't fail," Conley says. "Amy won."

Ellis defeated Butterfield for the second vice president position, which set off more accusa-

tions from the Empower party of the Daily Nebraskan's misappropriation of power.

Those accusations continue even now. In the end, the election's results, which surprised nearly everyone (including the Daily Nebraskan), cannot be answered clearly.

There are enough factors to spread the wealth around.

This series, before it even became an actual series in print, had a life of its own. It proliferated upon itself. Before one word was written, a bitter taste was left in the mouths of some, sweet in others.

It becomes a matter of perception.

And a matter of the series' opening quote, delivered by Julius Caesar, which cannot fall upon blind eyes, not when one looks back through the entire process, which doesn't stop, even after the election ends.

Men willingly believe.

**"So it got people talking. 'Did you see that Fidel Castro ad? What were those guys thinking?' The thing is, it got people thinking."**

**John Conley**  
Impact presidential candidate

What they wish. What. They. Wish. And that, as John Conley once said, is the breakdown.

## Campaign ends in flurry of emotion for Empower

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jaded. ... I knew some things I shouldn't have found out about their party dealing with me and whatnot.

"It was an interesting moment, to say the least."

He said back at the senate meeting Jaron Luttich, Impact campaign adviser, snickered that Mello lost.

But Mello avoided being mad. Instead, after being told the results, he told Kippenbrock to have Rometo and Butterfield, who were at the bar, called. Though he wanted to be the one who told them, he wouldn't get to the bar until 11 p.m.

**"It made me feel good about myself knowing I didn't do anything irate or do anything that went against certain parties or certain people."**

**Heath Mello**  
Empower presidential candidate

Mello arrives at Mainstreet, where the rest of party has gathered for the second week. But rather than a celebration, there's a blanket of solemnity.

Party supporters — most of them in blue and orange Empower T-shirts — sit around circle tables on the main floor of the bar. All in all, no one knows for sure what to say.

After hugging his girlfriend, who was in tears earlier, and a few others, Mello makes his way to the stairs at the back and side of the main floor bar area. As I'm waiting to hear what he'll say, I hear talk at a table near me criticizing the Daily Nebraskan. It would be a common theme that night.

Mello makes a few comments, basically telling his supporters thanks.

Earlier, Rometo and Butterfield made the announcement Empower lost, and as their final words trailed off: "Good luck next year, I'm proud of you," the lyrics of a Billy Joel song come over the speaker system: "... can you play me a memory? I'm not really sure how it goes ... But it's sad and it's sweet, and I knew it complete ..."

Before Mello would show it, Butterfield made it clear he was, at least for that night, blaming his party's defeat on the Daily Nebraskan. At one point, as two reporters and two photographers sat on a bench on the left wall of the bar, approximately in the middle, Butterfield stood at an angle about 10 feet away.

His months of campaigning, money spent and dedication to the campaign was that night, seemingly all for naught. His actions went contrary to his normal calm demeanor that night.

"Fuck them. Fuck them. Fuck them. Fuck the DN. Put that in there. Fuck the DN — really ..."

Later: "That's the beer talking."

Soon after, he walks away and spills some of his beer on his shoes.

Later on, he came over to my and another reporter's table to ash his cigar into our ashtray, blow some smoke and swear a few more times. All the while, Michael Jackson's "Beat It" would blare, the first fast song of the night.

Rometo was less visibly upset, even smiling as I

visited with her later on. She commented briefly, saying "Well, it was a good experience — an expensive one, but a good experience."

Then, Dave Saylor, an Empower supporter, who was sitting with Rometo, compared the race to "Star Wars," saying Empower was the empire and everyone else the rebels. The goal: to quash the empire. Nothing else mattered.

Closer to midnight, about 30 minutes after he arrived, Mello sits down and takes questions from a reporter in a booth. He lights a cigarette and answers, most of his replies pretty short. He didn't really have much to say, he said.

"It hasn't sunk in yet that I lost," he says. He wouldn't comment much on the Daily Nebraskan's effect on the campaign, though much of the previous weeks and weeks to come were full of criticism.

But he hadn't had much time to get his thoughts together. In the next couple days, he said, he would.

Instead, he talks about how, at this university, experience counts for nothing. Don't get involved, he says, because it won't get you anywhere.

"Students don't care," he says, sounding helpless, all the while bidding farewell to people as they walked

by our booth. His face, to them, not downtrodden. He seemed rather thankful for the people that surrounded him. It didn't give him much time or space to realize his loss.

But that was it. Unlike the last election day, Mello and his party members didn't head to the A-Team get-together at Crane River to say good race. Nor did they call. Mostly, they hung out at the bar.

In fact, not much else was said that night. Not to me. Not to anyone.

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It was the Daily Nebraskan that may have led ultimately to the demise of the Empower party, Mello said.

Mello was upset about the paper to the extent that he would contemplate with Kidd making a motion to strike the paper's funds it receives from student fees. But Mello said that night he hadn't known if he won or lost.

So he didn't know if the publicity he received affected the election. Instead, he elected to abstain from the vote on Daily Nebraskan student-fee appropriations.

The three things in the newspaper he was most upset about included the editorial supporting A-Team, Neal Obermeyer's cartoons and an article that ran the day of the election about a radio show people are still talking about.

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About 1:30 a.m., early the Tuesday before the run-off, Mello stands outside the Kappa Alpha Theta Sorority house, two women from the sorority with him, as he takes another puff off his cigarette.

Mello was waiting for his running mates, Rometo and Butterfield, to return from Avery Hall, where they were visiting with Joel Schafer, A-Team presidential candidate.

Two things were at issue that night: Why did Rometo call into a KRNU radio show pretending to be "Lindsay" from Neihardt to ask Mello a question? And, was Mello drunk on the air?

Later, Butterfield tells me Mello had maybe six drinks — Mello had told Butterfield he was stressed out. But, in reality, no one knows for sure. Mello said he had a few drinks with supper. But rumors still flew; Mello said he's even heard about it in his hometown.

When Rometo called, Butterfield

said, Mello was rambling on a question the three had practiced beforehand. Rometo was trying to get him back on track.

And because Rometo called Mello, she decided she had to call Schafer, who was on the show after Mello, and ask him the same question.

Riley Peterson, Schafer's first vice presidential candidate, recognized Rometo's voice and called and told Schafer. Schafer called Rometo on it. Rometo said she was embarrassed.

As Empower members and even A-Team members would say later on, no one did anything morally wrong — it was just a politically dumb move — a knee-jerk reaction of sorts. But the newspaper still reported on it, and the story ran the day of the run-off.

That night, things came to a head, and the three realized they just wanted everything to be over. A-Team members would agree. The Empower candidates lamented their decision to be in a run-off debate the coming evening.

I really don't want to do this debate, Mello says. Rometo and Butterfield echo his thoughts. I just want to get this election over with, Mello says.

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The Thursday after the election was amazing. It really was, Mello says.

"I've never had so many people come up to me and say, 'It's going to be all right,'" Mello said. "Everything happens for a reason." I swear I've heard that like a thousand times.

Mello took time over spring break, which was that next week, to think, he said. He came to realization that his involvement with ASUN had come to an end.

"I really feel I'd be intruding if I applied for a significant position. Because you know I still feel my expertise is above and beyond anyone in ASUN, in this upcoming senate," Mello said.

"There's not really a position that strikes my chord. I said I'd help (Schafer) out ... There's a reason why I ran for president ..."

"The people that will apply, I think, will do a great job."

Over break, he did a lot of reading on state and national political campaigns. He watched movies like "Bulworth" and "The War Room," a

documentary on Clinton and Gore's campaign staff.

"It helped me get my mind off of ASUN and the university," Mello said. Based off of his reading and viewing, he said he looked at what Empower did wrong during its campaign.

When he came back the week after, he said, he contemplated running for office in student organizations he's still involved in. He decided not to.

"I just don't think I have the desire to do a lot of the stuff I have been doing," he said.

Instead, he will be helping a man from his hometown run for State Board of Education. And he will be mulling whether to continue a path toward a teaching career or if he would rather go into politics.

Vernon Miller, who ran for the Voice party last year and lost, is one of Mello's best friends and was his adviser throughout the campaign.

"He was preparing me through this whole election to lose," Mello said. "Just in case. I was very confident through this whole election that we would win."

Mello said Miller told him the Empower name is going to be attached to him for as long as he's at the university. He's probably right.

That recognition is sure to fade, though, and just bits and pieces of the election will shine through in students' minds.

Like the radio show, maybe. Like the fact Empower lost to what some considered a rogue party. And that it was one of an unusual number of parties. And maybe there was some controversy over something.

Likely, little of what the Daily Nebraskan printed will be remembered, except by those who thought they were affected.

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*There's a lot of things we learned about the campaign process, how we handle the media. It's probably going to be the biggest thing, especially on our campus ...*

*Honestly, it broke us. I'll be blatant, it did. Our relationship with you guys killed us. Everyone is talking, that's the only thing I've heard about ... 'Damn, the Daily Nebraskan really hated you guys, didn't they? You know, I don't know if they hated us, you know. They didn't support us ... like, I don't know, the fatality of it all ...'*