

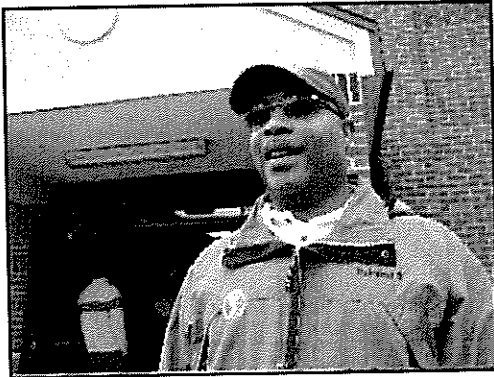
★ Election '08 ★

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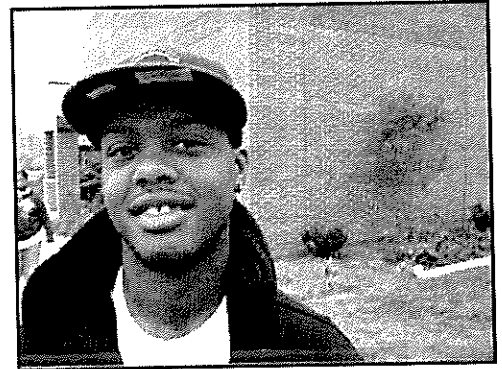
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Convicted felon exercises restored right to vote

Anthony West's presence at the Fairview Elementary polling station made one of his former teachers cry.



Anthony West



Aaron Hash

Another friend hugged him and encouraged him to run for mayor.

Voting day was a long day coming for the 40-year-old West, who petitioned Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine a few months ago for restoration of his voting rights. He was imprisoned twice in the mid-'90s for drug-related crimes and has gone on to become the state's program director of Virginia CARES, a re-entry program for ex-offenders.

"I want to experience this so much; I don't care if I have to wait in line till midnight," West said Monday. But at his polling station Tuesday, he voted quickly during his lunch hour and still had time to catch up with former teachers, coaches and old friends. He seemed to know everyone in line.

"I've done my time for the crimes I committed, and especially with this election here and the chance of making history with the first African-American president, there was no way I was going to miss it."

Convicted felons have to wait five years for violent offenses and three years for nonviolent offenses before petitioning for voting rights restoration, West said. They also have to be off probation/parole with all court fines paid.

West was one of 5,580 new voters registered in the city this year.

After he voted, he stopped to talk to another new voter, 19-year-old Aaron Hash. A part-time worker at UPS, Hash said he was considering signing up to serve in the U.S. Army.

"I like Obama's policies and I like his plans to end the war in Iraq," Hash said. "My mother is very concerned; she knows that if we can get taken out of Iraq, I'd have a better chance" of staying out of harm's way.

By mid-day, more than 2,000 people had already voted at Fairview, one of the largest polling stations in the city, according to election worker Richard Taylor.

As West and Hash chatted, a pair of teenagers riding double on a moped squealed through the nearby parking lot.

"I like your Obama sticker, but it'd be even better if you had a helmet on to go with it," West told them.

-- Beth Macy