My name is Graham Oberland. I am a proud Tar Heel and a nonprofit Director at Rural Opportunity Institute (ROI) where I spend every day listening to communities in rural Eastern NC. My job is to translate the everyday frustrations of people from underserved communities into systems change that improves their lives and breaks cycles of intergenerational trauma. I am running for Second Vice Chair because I want to do the same in Durham, where I live. I believe we can make the Durham County Democrats a shining example nationwide for how to create a **bottom-up,** i**nclusive, and urgent** party. Let me tell you a little more about what I mean by bottom-up, inclusive, and urgent, and why I can get it done:

**Bottom-Up**

Many people no longer trust the Democratic party, because the party treats them as customers rather than active participants. I want to shift the locus of agency to the people, so that everyone from the newest volunteer to the most seasoned veteran feels like they have a say in what the party does. This starts with listening. I would like to revamp our training processes so that they involve just as much listening as giving information. Before we tell people what to do, we should be asking them what frustrates them, what they are good at, and what excites them. We should also conduct debriefs after every event or canvass and act on feedback.

I know I can do this because I already do it at my job. For four years, I have run a policy listening session every month, open to all, where I find out what’s on people’s minds and then act on it. I have designed, adjusted, and scaled programs with 20+ organizations, from public school districts to Sheriffs, by listening to the people who use those programs. Before my current job, I spent five years in consulting at Deloitte in DC, a job that also centered on listening. For clients spanning non-profits in India to the American military, I learned how to listen and solve problems. I know how to make systems work for people, and I’m ready to do that here in Durham.

**Inclusive**

It’s no secret that the Democratic party now feels like the party of elites. I want to change that by building the party in partnership with all of our city, especially people who are Black, Latino, Asian, in high school or college, unhoused, and underpaid. I want to meet people where they are, holding events and listening sessions at businesses, homeless shelters, churches, and bars. When combined with the bottom-up approach I talked about above, this mindset can powerfully broaden our party. We can create a party where all of Durham feels that their voice is welcome.

Again, I will draw on my professional experience to achieve this goal. At ROI, the vast majority of community members I work with are Black, representing our majority-Black area. I also revamped, recruited for, and answer to our Community Accountability Board, which includes high school and college students, pastors, therapists, teachers, and business owners. Our board is 82% black and 73% women. We have built trust over almost a decade by doing what I want to do in Durham – holding community meetings, listening, and then acting on what we hear. Every community is different, but I hope to learn from these experiences to shape the Durham Democrats represent all of our city.

**Urgent**

Most of us have felt the dissonance when our politicians tell us that this moment is uniquely dangerous, but then we show up to volunteer and everything seems normal. If this moment truly is an existential threat to democracy, we need to act like it. That means pairing long-term party-building with short-term urgency: organizing rallies, mutual aid, and direct action against legislators undermining our rights. We must give people not just hope, but *power*—a way to fight back that feels real and meaningful.

There is a vacuum of political leadership and social solidarity in America. People know that many things are wrong, but don’t know of credible organizations offering a way to do something about it. Durham is already a bright spot in this dark landscape. The Durham and NC Democrats fight hard against outrageous gerrymandering and corruption in our state. There are also a plethora of other groups working hard to advance progressive ideals in Durham. Let’s build on this foundation to create a party that people trust will listen to them and do something about their problems.

I have the qualifications to make this happen, including a bachelor’s degree from UNC-Chapel Hill, where I was a Morehead-Cain scholar, an MBA from UPenn’s Wharton School, a Masters of International Relations from Johns Hopkins’ School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), and five years of management consulting at Deloitte. But more importantly, I have experience listening to the people of this state and a track record of acting on their concerns. I would be honored by the chance to combine these tools with a burning desire to strengthen Durham and our party as your Second Vice Chair.