A Rallying Cry Amid Attack Ads in Delaware

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE

DOVER, Del. — Steve Bentz, a compact man sporting a blond flattop and a blue “beer party” T-shirt, was thrilled to meet Christine O’Donnell, a conservative running for the Senate, over the Labor Day weekend.

“I’d do anything for you,” declared Mr. Bentz, 39, a project manager for an office furniture company.

The candidate, mingling with a supportive crowd of about 60 people at the Masonic Lodge here on Sunday night, was so happy that she handed over her entire stack of campaign fliers to Mr. Bentz’s wife, Billie Jo.

Mr. Bentz already stays up on his computer until 3 a.m. on a self-appointed mission to defend Ms. O’Donnell, mostly against accusations that she has not kept her own financial house in order.

This is a campaign in which some voters seem as embattled and dedicated as the candidate. Repeatedly, her supporters told Ms. O’Donnell (and interviewers) of their anger over the “liberal socialist” drift of the country and over what they view as a biased news media as Ms. O’Donnell has come under a suddenly heavy — and unexpected — barrage from Representative Michael N. Castle in an escalating battle for the Republican nomination for the Senate seat once held by Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. The primary is Sept. 14, and the winner will face Chris Coons, a Democrat, in November.

Giving the race extra urgency is that it is a special election to replace Mr. Biden; the winner can be seated the day after the Nov. 2 election and vote on any bills the Democrats may push through an otherwise lame-duck session.

Mr. Castle is painting Ms. O’Donnell, whose campaign received a pledge of $250,000 last week from the Tea Party Express, as untrustworthy with public money because she is
“reckless” with her own. She seeks to rebut the charges on her Web site, and casts Mr. Castle as a liberal career politician who does not listen to the people.

The attacks against her were a main topic of conversation at her public events over the weekend as Ms. O’Donnell met with supporters, although some said they were not registered as Republicans and could not vote in the closed primary.

“I went on the Internet the other day and was reading all this mudslinging, and, ugh, it was horrible,” Pat Beams, 70, a retired nurse, told Ms. O’Donnell on Sunday at a park in Camden, where about 20 volunteers had gathered in support.

“Even if she should have money problems,” Mrs. Beams said later, “I don’t think there’s too many in this world that hasn’t had money problems.”

Ms. O’Donnell has converted the attacks into a talking point.

“It’s a shame that an incumbent congressman would have to resort to that instead of defending his own record,” she told Mrs. Beams, “but, fortunately, people see right through that.”

Ms. O’Donnell added that the attacks had been good for fund-raising. “We raised about $30,000 for the whole month of August,” she said, “but we’ve raised $50,000 in the past four days since he started attacking.” (Mr. Castle has more than $2.5 million in his war chest.)

For others, speaking up for Ms. O’Donnell has much to do with where they are in their own lives.

Jill Bianchi, 57, who works for a bank and is a registered independent who cannot vote in the Republican primary, is nonetheless a volunteer who often speaks on Ms. O’Donnell’s behalf.

“She has faults like everybody else, but I want to give her a chance,” Mrs. Bianchi said. “Now that I’m older and wiser, I realize I can’t just keep sitting on the couch complaining.”