

NEWS

Who are the players in the ‘ghost’ candidate scheme that helped elect Sen. Jason Brodeur?



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State charges against a “ghost” candidate and her alleged collaborators further taint the 2020 election of state Sen. Jason Brodeur, who represents Seminole County and a small portion of Volusia County.

The Senate seat was open and hotly contested. Brodeur, the CEO of the Seminole County Chamber of Commerce, was the Republican nominee.

He knew that four years earlier, a congressional seat that had encompassed much of Seminole County was flipped from red to blue by Stephanie Murphy. Brodeur and the Republicans most certainly did not want that to happen again.

Ghost candidate pleads guilty in Frank Artiles’ Miami election corruption case

Frank Artiles bragged about spoiling 2020 Florida Senate race, lobbyist says

‘Ghost’ candidate scandal: Texts show worry as dark money scheme to help Florida GOP candidates unraveled

Meanwhile, Democrats presented a formidable foe. Among five candidates in the primary, Patricia Sigman, a well-respected labor attorney, would emerge as the victor. And while Brodeur had raised more than \$1 million in his campaign, Sigman was no slouch, raising nearly half a million.

The rhetoric was hot and the campaign ads predictably negative.

What came as an October surprise, though, was a flood of PAC money that gave an underground no-party affiliation candidate a big boost. Here's a look at the three players who were charged last week and what questions remain unaddressed by an investigative summary compiled by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement Public Corruption Unit.

The 'ghost' candidate

Jestine Iannotti, 36, of Winter Springs, is a former Seminole County schools paraprofessional and substitute teacher who was ~~swimming in student loan debt, listing her net worth as negative \$154,000~~ on a June 2020 financial disclosure form.

With the help of Eric Foglesong, a Winter Park political consultant with a criminal record, Iannotti filed paperwork to become a state senator on June 4, 2020. In an interview with investigators, she said she had spoken with friends about running and said Ben Paris, the former mayor of Longwood and current Seminole County Republican Executive Committee chairman, was among those encouraging her.

"Iannotti indicated that she wanted to run as a political candidate to 'try something new' and to see if she was 'good at it,'" the investigative summary states.

In order to become an NPA candidate before the deadline that month, Iannotti had to pay \$1,187.88 as a qualifying fee.

Iannotti initially told investigators that the \$1,200 she collected in campaign donations was cash she deposited into her official campaign account, according to the summary. After stopping the interview to consult with her attorney, Iannotti changed her previous statement. "Okay. Uh, where I got misconstrued earlier, um, so the cash that was deposited was from me, myself. Um, I opened the account with \$100 and everything, and then later on, I deposited \$500. The rest was checks."

Foglesong provided the checks as someone who helped her find donors, she told authorities.

Investigators reviewed Iannotti's bank records and determined her initial account, that cash was used for the deposit, was correct and "contradicted her second statement that the deposits were made through checks."

Iannotti is charged with five counts related to falsifying campaign records said investigators, as well as illegal cash contributions.

She is scheduled to be arraigned on Aug. 2.

Michael Barber, a Winter Park attorney representing Iannotti, said in an email she is not scheduling interviews and is focused on her criminal defense.

The campaign consultant

James “Eric” Foglesong, 45, of Winter Park, helped Iannotti establish her campaign, supplying her with enough money to cover the entry fee and assistance in filling out paperwork, prosecutors allege.

He told investigators he did not recall whether Iannotti reached out to him, or if he reached out to her. And Iannotti told investigators she didn’t recall how they had become acquainted.

But text messages subpoenaed by the FDLE indicate they began talking about Iannotti running for office on May 29, 2020.

Foglesong’s stock as a campaign strategist was down.

He was on probation. He had pleaded guilty to grand theft following his April 2019 arrest by FDLE, who had alleged he had taken \$20,000 from a political committee he established, Citizens for Safety and Justice. Between 2018 and 2019, the PAC had collected \$83,000 from donors looking to help the reelection of Orange County Sheriff John Mina.

So a year later, Foglesong re-emerged as a backer of NPA candidates.

“I think I gave money to a couple of independent candidates in races last year because I’m fed up with both parties,” Foglesong told The News-Journal in 2021.

He gave \$300 to Iannotti to help her with her filing fee, and also rounded up two other donations.

One was \$100 from Todd Karvoski of Orlando.

Karvoski told investigators he would occasionally get drinks with Foglesong but that he had not given money to Iannotti or spoken with Foglesong about a campaign donation.

“I never wrote a check,” he told investigators. “I’m not even a registered voter. I have no interest in any campaigns, or any of that.”

Another \$500 contribution to Iannotti’s campaign was listed as a loan from herself.

In a text message, Iannotti asked Foglesong: “So unofficially who gave the extra money?”

Foglesong replied: “Me.”

A call seeking comment from Foglesong was not answered Friday.

He is facing three third-degree felony and two misdemeanor charges related to campaign finance violations and is facing arraignment on Aug. 2.

The well-connected party boss

Benjamin Paris, 38, of Longwood, is chairman of the Seminole County Republican Executive Committee.

Although he wasn't chairman in 2020, Paris was a former mayor of Longwood who happened to be employed as vice president/operations at the Seminole County Chamber of Commerce, where Brodeur is CEO.

Paris resigned from the chamber on Tuesday.

He was also a candidate himself in 2020, seeking the Republican nomination for Seminole County Council District 3. He lost by a 2-to-1 margin to Lee Constantine.

Iannotti told investigators Paris was someone she consulted when she was considering running. They had friends in common.

Paris is accused of making a \$200 donation to Iannotti's campaign, but asking his cousin, Steven Smith of Fern Park, to put his name on the donation in a June 19, 2020, phone call. Prosecutors allege Smith agreed, but did not receive any money for doing so.

In a phone call on April 8, 2021, Paris instructed Smith: “If anyone came around asking about it, to say that, yes, I had made the donation and I knew the candidate and I thought she would be good for the county,” the FDLE report shows.

Paris, who declined to make a statement to investigators, has pleaded not guilty to a misdemeanor charge of making a campaign contribution in the name of another person. His arraignment is scheduled for June 17.

Paris did not respond to a call seeking comment on Thursday.

Unanswered questions

During election season, Iannotti laid low, campaigning little if at all. She avoided interviews with the media, a common tactic for reaching voters with a message. The Miami Herald and Dagens Nyheter, a daily newspaper in Sweden, unearthed immigration documents showing she had applied for residency in Sweden prior to filing for office in June.

Yet in October, a political committee independent of her campaign spent \$180,000 on flyers that were mailed to voters, proclaiming her a candidate “WHO WILL ALWAYS BE THERE FOR US!”

The flyers featured the stock image of a Black woman. Iannotti is white.

The PAC that spent the money was simply named The Truth. Its chairperson was a 26-year-old woman who was “freaking out about money,” as she had gotten pregnant. She was recruited by a friend and offered by Tallahassee Republican political operative Alex Alvarado \$4,000 to serve as chairperson with virtually no responsibilities, according to testimony she gave Miami-Dade State Attorney’s Office investigators.

The Truth and a second PAC, Our Florida, funneled a total of \$550,000 into the flyers supporting Iannotti and two other “ghost candidates” in South Florida races, Alex Rodriguez in Senate District 37 and Celso Alfonso in Senate District 39.

The messaging on the flyers appeared to target left-leaning, independent voters in competitive races all eventually won by Republicans.

Rodriguez admitted he was paid more than \$44,000 by a former state senator, Frank Artiles, to run. He pleaded guilty last year in Miami-Dade County to two election-fraud counts and agreed to testify against Artiles, a campaign consultant tied to the influential Gainesville firm Data Targeting Inc., and Alvarado, the Tallahassee campaign strategist who pulled the strings on the PACs that funded the flyers supporting the “ghost” candidates.

Artiles, who has pleaded not guilty, has his next court hearing scheduled for Sept. 1.

The FDLE investigation into Iannotti, Foglesong and Paris does not wade into the PAC money.

It also leaves unanswered questions about whether Iannotti received any payment for running, as Rodriguez had.

And it does not probe the beneficiary of Iannotti's campaign, the state senator Jason Brodeur. Did he know that Paris – his employee at the Seminole County Chamber of Commerce who had endorsed him – donated to his opponent, Iannotti?

If investigators asked about any of that, they didn't include it in their report.

And Brodeur did not respond to a request for comment.

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