

thetimes-tribune.com

Enter a search term...

Search

Weather Forecast

HOME NEWS SPORTS LIFESTYLES BUSINESS OPINION CONTACT JOBS CLASSIFIEDS SHOPSCRANTON
NEWS QUIZZES | GAS DRILLING | ELECTION | NEPA 911 | EDUCATION | OBITS | HEALTH-SCIENCE | LOCAL HISTORY | COURTS | STATE

Luzerne's other disgraced judge a study in contrasts

BY DAVE JANOSKI (STAFF WRITER)

Published: September 19, 2011

ARTICLE TOOLS

FONT SIZE: [A] [A] [A]

15

OUR SOCIAL NETWORKS



FACEBOOK

Recommend 17

SIGN UP TEXT ALERTS | NEWSLETTER

WILKES-BARRE - Michael T. Conahan has been a well-respected judge and a mobster's confidant, a generous friend to those in need and an admitted racketeer who took millions for locking up juveniles in for-profit prisons.

Mr. Conahan's dark side will land him in U.S. District Court in Scranton for sentencing Friday, facing up to 20 years in prison in the notorious kids-for-cash scandal.

While the other former Luzerne County judge charged in the case, Mark A. Ciavarella Jr., has drawn more media attention and public vilification, Mr. Conahan played a key and active role, stage-managing surreptitious payments, false bookkeeping entries and the delivery of boxes stuffed with illicit cash, according to court testimony and documents.

In pleading guilty to conspiracy last year, Mr. Conahan admitted he advanced the kids-for-cash scheme by closing a county-owned detention center, signing a secret agreement to house juveniles at a new for-profit center and sealing a lawsuit to shield the center's former co-owner, Robert J. Powell, from publicity over a critical state audit.

In a conversation with Mr. Powell that Mr. Powell secretly taped for federal agents, Mr. Conahan took the lead in formulating a common defense and pledging to stand together.

"When this is all done, whatever we have (to do) to sit down to work it out or help each other, we'll do it," Mr. Conahan said, according to court documents.

Time and again during his 37 years in public service, Mr. Conahan used his wealth and position to aid others, sometimes admirably, sometimes less so.

The son of a former Hazleton mayor who counts three doctors, an attorney and an investment banker among his eight siblings, Mr. Conahan and his wife, Barbara, had a net worth of \$4.5 million in 2009, according to court documents, with investments in real estate, an ambulance service and a beverage consulting firm.

Mr. Conahan, 59, used that wealth to help family and friends open businesses, buy homes and pay tuition and other bills. Many of the loans, totaling about \$1 million, were not repaid, according to the documents.

Mr. Ciavarella was a major beneficiary, borrowing nearly \$400,000 to pay household, credit card and other expenses.

Another recipient was Ronald Belletiere, a Florida man sentenced in the 1990s to 4½ years in federal prison in connection with a cocaine-trafficking ring in Hazleton.

At a sidebar conference between attorneys and a judge, unheard by the jury and public, a prosecutor called Mr. Conahan an "undicted co-conspirator" in the drug case. The allegation became public eight months after Mr. Conahan was sworn in for his first term as a county judge in 1994. He denied the allegation at a press conference, blaming it on "common criminals" trying to curry favor with prosecutors.

But in 2006-2008, the Conahans loaned Mr. Belletiere \$500,000 to set up a car dealership and bowling alley and put a down payment on a condominium, all in Florida, according to court documents.

Efforts to reach Mr. Belletiere were unsuccessful.

Mr. Conahan was never charged in the trafficking case nor disciplined by the state Judicial Conduct Board, which investigated the allegations.

He won a second 10-year term in a 2003 retention election.

By then, Mr. Conahan had spent nearly his entire adult life in the judiciary.

The boss of the courthouse

Six months after graduating from the Temple University School of Law in 1977, Mr. Conahan was appointed a magisterial district judge by then-Gov. Milton Shapp. A registered Democrat from a politically potent family, he won three elections to retain that post before successfully running for county judge in 1993.

Elected by his fellow judges to a five-year term as president judge in 2002, he had a reputation as an able administrator who brought more order to scheduling and case assignments and displayed a low-key and affable manner from the bench.

Around the courthouse, Mr. Conahan was known as "the boss," according to testimony before a state panel that investigated the kids-for-cash case.

When former Judge Chester B. Muroski complained to the county commissioners in 2005 that his Orphans' Court, which dealt with child custody and welfare matters, was underfunded because the county was overspending on juvenile detention, Mr. Conahan unilaterally transferred Judge Muroski from Orphans' Court, where he had served for nearly 24 years, to criminal court.

ACTIVATE YOUR ONLINE ACCESS NOW

GAME DAY GEAR

CREATE THE PERFECT TAILGATING EXPERIENCE

HOBBY LOBBY

40% OFF

One item at regular price

BECU VISA REWARDS
IMAGINE THE POSSIBILITIES.

APPLY TODAY

NCUA

DEAL OF THE DAY

Buy One Ticket for \$25 & Get One FREE to Circle of Screams

SAVE 50% TODAY

only \$25

CLICK HERE TO SAVE

POWERED BY REFERLOCAL.COM

Scranton Daily Deals powered by ReferLocal

LATEST CONTESTS & QUIZZES

Local News Quizzes
Love our local news quizzes in print? Take them online!

Win tickets to Cirque Du Soleil Dralion
Enter to win tickets to Cirque Du Soleil Dralion at Mchegan Sun Arena in October! Deadline to enter in September

18.

Press Pass
Being a VIP Subscriber has its Privileges! Receive 20% off your bill with participating businesses. Click to see.

"In my view, the reassignment was done in order to silence me and further encourage me to, at that point in time, retire," Judge Muroski said in 2009. Judge Muroski stayed on and became president judge after Mr. Conahan and Mr. Ciavarella were charged in 2009.

Cashing in on kids

Before he was in office as president judge one month, Mr. Conahan signed a secret agreement promising the county would lodge juvenile defendants in a for-profit detention center proposed for Pittston Twp.

The developers of the center used the agreement to secure financing for the project, prosecutors say.

In December 2002, Mr. Conahan announced the courts would no longer send juveniles to the aging county-owned detention center in Wilkes-Barre, which he and Mr. Ciavarella, the county's Juvenile Court judge, argued was decrepit and dangerous, even though the state had inspected and licensed the facility.

By then, the two judges had already agreed to split a \$1 million "finder's fee" from the builder of the for-profit center, Robert K. Mericle, a longtime friend of Mr. Ciavarella, according to testimony at Mr. Ciavarella's trial.

When the for-profit center opened in 2003, Mr. Conahan placed an angry call to a Luzerne County juvenile probation official, complaining that state limits on admissions to the center in its first weeks were limiting its revenues, the probation official told the state panel investigating the kids-for-cash scandal.

Over the next five years, the judges would receive another \$1.8 million from Mr. Mericle and center co-owner Mr. Powell, Mr. Conahan acknowledged at his plea hearing in 2010. During that period, the county agreed to lease the for-profit facility, known as PA Child Care. Mr. Mericle expanded that center and built a second in western Pennsylvania under contracts with Mr. Powell.

PA Child Care and related companies were paid more than \$30 million by Luzerne County until 2008.

Mr. Conahan took early retirement in January 2008, even though he had six years left on his second term and was 15 years from the mandatory retirement age of 70. He immediately withdrew about \$300,000 he had contributed to the state pension fund and continued working as a senior judge, presiding over a new drug treatment court.

The other side of the bench

A year later, Mr. Conahan and Mr. Ciavarella signed a plea agreement that would have sent them to jail for seven years.

The agreement was ultimately rejected by Senior U.S. District Judge Edwin M. Kosik, who found that Mr. Conahan refused to take responsibility for his crimes and attempted to obstruct justice in his dealings with federal probation officials conducting a pre-sentence investigation.

Judge Kosik also cited "self-serving statements" by Mr. Ciavarella, who took issue with portions of the government's case in a letter to the media and in a hearing over allegations of case-fixing ordered by the state Supreme Court.

In that hearing, Mr. Ciavarella confirmed other witnesses' testimony about a long-standing friendship between Mr. Conahan and William D'Elia, who prosecutors say is the head of a local crime family. Mr. D'Elia and Mr. Conahan regularly met for breakfast in a restaurant just outside Wilkes-Barre, according to witnesses, and court staffers testified they delivered sealed envelopes from the mobster to the judge's chambers. Mr. D'Elia has been in prison for money laundering and witness tampering since 2006.

Mr. Conahan declined to testify at the hearing and has kept quiet through the whole furor over the kids-for-cash case. In March 2010, he signed a second plea agreement in which he admitted to the government's charges and left the length of his sentence to the judge.

Mr. Ciavarella fought his charges at a high-profile trial in February. He was sentenced to 28 years in prison.

Mr. Conahan's attorney, Philip Gelso, declined to say week whether he will present testimony or letters from those whom Mr. Conahan has helped over the years.

If history is any guide, it is possible Mr. Conahan will face justice Friday in near cipher-like silence, offering little insight into the contradictions and betrayals that have marked his career.

Contact the writer: djanoski@citizensvoice.com

Popular Offers

ADVERTISEMENT



The Next Google Has Already Arrived, You Just Don't Know it yet.

One simple strategy you can use to profit like a legendary investor

Analyst predicts pot could soon become legal in all 50 states! (shocking)

Pentagon insider says THIS is what American seniors absolutely must prepare for now. Details here...

We welcome user discussion on our site, under the following guidelines:

To comment you must first create a profile and sign-in with a verified DISQUS account or social network ID. Sign up here.

Comments in violation of the rules will be denied, and repeat violators will be banned. Please help police the community by flagging offensive comments for our moderators to review. By posting a comment, you agree to our full terms and conditions. Click here to read terms and conditions.

Comments for this thread are now closed.



AROUND THE WEB

WHAT'S THIS?

businesses offering discounts to Press Pass Subscribers.



Medical Guide 2014
A listing of health care businesses in NEPA

Arrest Records: 2 Secrets

© instantcheckmate.com
1) Enter Name and State. 2) Access Full Background Checks Instantly.

NATIONAL VIDEO

Latest News section with video thumbnails and titles: Apple Unveils Smartwatch, Taking innovation to...; New Fallout From The Rice Controversy; Machele attack caught on video; What Parents Need to Know About Enterovirus

- Family of man killed by nursing home worker sues facility
UPDATED Expressway now open after truck crashes through barrier
Lackawanna County Court Notes 9/10/2014
Cordaro seeks bail pending hearing on conviction
Police: Drunk stole restaurant's propane tank
Scranton businessman loses bid to dismiss theft charges
NEW Judge tosses guilty plea of suspended Trail teacher

JOBS570

SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST, SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER, CEMETERY GROUNDS MAINTENANCE DRIVER, NIGHT AUDIT HOTEL SECURITY RN, LPN, CNA

More top jobs

- Expressway shut down after truck crashes through barrier (18 comments · 1 hour ago)
After firing off shotgun, ex-police chiefs son busted for fighting with cops (5 comments · 2 hours ago)
Superintendents shoot down new league proposal (3 comments · 1 hour ago)
Dem governor nominee Wolf calls for more "civic engagement" (13 comments · 2 hours ago)
YOUR OPINION (57 comments · 11 hours ago)

REALESTATE570

1 Clarks Summit
2 Scranton
3 Taylor
3 Archbald
3 Scranton

More ton homes

- NEW Scranton Prep's longest serving president to step down

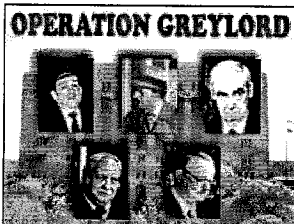


Stories

Home • News • Stories • 2004 • March • Operation Greylord

Investigations of Public Corruption Rooting Crookedness Out of Government

03/15/04



Today marks an important anniversary in the annals of public corruption investigations in the United States.

Twenty years ago today, in a federal courtroom in Chicago, a jury found Harold Conn (top center in photo) guilty on all 4 counts of accepting bribes to be passed on to Cook County judges as payment for fixing tickets. The evidence? He had been caught live on FBI tapes.

This "bagman" had been Deputy Traffic Court Clerk in the Cook County judicial system, and he was the first defendant to be found guilty in a mammoth sting investigation of crooked officials in the Cook County courts.

It was called **OPERATION GREYLORD**, named after the curly wigs worn by British judges. And in the end—through undercover operations that used honest and very courageous judges and lawyers posing as crooked ones... and with the strong assistance of the Cook County court and local police—92 officials had been indicted, including 17 judges, 48 lawyers, eight policemen, 10 deputy sheriffs, eight court officials, and one state legislator. Nearly all were convicted, most of them pleading guilty (just a few are shown in our photo). It was an important first step to cleaning up the administration of justice in Cook County.

That's really the whole point. Abuse of the public trust cannot and must not be tolerated. Corrupt practices in government strike at the heart of social order and justice. And that's why the FBI has the ticket on investigations of public corruption as a top priority.

How'd that happen? Historically, of course, these cases were considered local matters. A county court clerk taking bribes? Let the county handle it.

But in the 1970s, state and local officials asked for help. They didn't have the resources to handle such intense cases, and they valued the authority and credibility that outside investigators brought to the table. By 1976, the Department of Justice had created a Public Integrity Section, and the FBI was tasked with the investigations, focusing on major, systemic corruption in the body politic.

Who's investigated? Public servants: members of Congress and state legislatures; members of the Administration and governors' offices; judges and court staffs; all of law enforcement; all government agencies. Plus everyone who works with government and is willing to pay for "special favors": lobbyists, contractors, consultants, lawyers, U.S. businesses in foreign countries, you name it.

What kind of crimes? Bribery, kickbacks, and fraud. Vote buying, voter intimidation, impersonation. Political coercion. Racketeering and obstruction of justice. Trafficking of illegal drugs.

How serious of a problem is it? Last year the FBI investigated 850 cases; brought in 655 indictments/informations; and got 525 who were either convicted or chose to plead.

Last words: Straight from Teddy Roosevelt: "Unless a man is honest we have no right to keep him in public life, it matters not how brilliant his capacity, it hardly matters how great his power of doing good service on certain lines may be...No man who is corrupt, no man who condones corruption in others, can possibly do his duty by the community."

[Accessibility](#) | [eRulemaking](#) | [Freedom of Information Act](#) | [Legal Notices](#) | [Legal Policies and Disclaimers](#) | [Links](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [USA.gov](#) | [White House](#)
 FBI.gov is an official site of the U.S. government, U.S. Department of Justice

Close

Story Index

By Date

By Subject

- Art Theft
- Civil Rights
- Counterterrorism
- Crimes Against Children
- Criminal Justice Information Services
- Cyber Crimes
- Director/FBI Leadership
- Field Cases
- Foreign Counterintelligence
- General
- History
- Intelligence
- International
- Lab/Operational Technology
- Linguist/Translation Program
- Major Thefts/Violent Crime
- Organized Crime/Drugs
- Partnerships
- Public/Community Outreach
- Public Corruption
- Recruiting/Diversity
- Responding to Your Concerns
- Technology
- Training
- White-Collar Crime