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HOUSTON POLITICS & POLICY

Judicial candidate returns illegal campaign donations

\$20,000 from couples exceeded state limits

A local judicial candidate said Tuesday that she has returned \$20,000 in campaign donations she acknowledged violated state contribution limits.

The donations to Meca Walker came from employees of Houston auto magnate Don McGill, who, at the time the donations were made, had a divorce case pending in the 247th state district family court. Walker is associate judge in that court and is vying against two others to be the Republican nominee to replace retiring incumbent Bonnie Hellums on that bench.

The campaign contributions in question, \$5,000 each from four Don McGill Toyota employees and each of their wives for a total of \$40,000, were made in a single day in December. The contributions make up 40 percent of the \$100,008 Walker raised in the campaign finance reporting period covering the last half of 2013. One of them came from dealership executive John McGill, another from his wife, Jelena.

State law limits the amount individuals and married couples can directly donate to a judicial candidate to \$5,000.

Walker said she returned the excess portion of the contributions - \$20,000 overall - Tuesday after her consultant called the Texas Ethics Commission and found out the donations exceeded that limit. Walker said she and her consultant were unaware that the individual limit applied to married couples.

"This is just a huge, innocent mistake that is being blown to epic proportions, and it doesn't have to be," she said, calling it as a "very tough, public lesson."



Walker, who said she had "no idea" McGill's divorce case was in the 247th court, said she contacted Hellums as soon as she found out the donors were connected to a case in their court.

Hellums, who is not seeking re-election, recused herself from the McGill case on Feb. 7, after she and Walker talked and "connected those dots," the candidate said.

Walker's campaign treasurer is Carel Stith, Hellums' husband.

Houston election lawyer Chad Dunn said "the public at large, even a lot of what I would call the professional donor class, have little knowledge" about contribution limits for judicial candidates.

Dots not connected

Bloggers, family lawyers and Walker's challengers in the March 4 Republican primary, however, have criticized Walker for not connecting the dots - and returning the money- sooner, suggesting it is odd for an associate judge not to be aware of a case involving a high-profile businessman. They also questioned why a candidate - especially one in a down-ballot judicial race - would not research big-money donors, particularly when several are employed by the same entity and all donated on the same day.

"It stinks all over," said Houston family lawyer Melanie Flowers, one of Walker's primary opponents. Walker's other opponent, Spring family lawyer John Schmude, said he would have "dug deeper" under the same circumstances.

Walker said the donations did raise an eyebrow, but she thought the donors were "affiliated with someone else."

"The names didn't mean anything to me," she said. "I was grateful and I reported it, and let me tell you something: If I thought for a moment that I was doing something wrong, for a moment, then I would not have reported it, I would not have accepted it. It doesn't mean it logically makes sense."

Calls and emails to the dealership and the employees who donated were not returned Tuesday.

9 non-lawyers

"It is an insult to Walker's intelligence to suggest that she did not immediately know who these nine donors were associated with or that she did not at least ask who these nine non-lawyers were who had given her the largest donations of her campaign," Webster family lawyer Greg Enos wrote in his monthly online newsletter about the goings-on in the Harris County Family Courthouse.

Citing the massive case loads in the family courts, Walker said she has been too busy - between

work and campaigning - to know about the McGill case or draw a connection between the case and the contributions sooner.

Records show Walker signed a temporary restraining order in the McGill case, but she said she signs "50 of these things a day, and I don't hear all the temporary restraining orders that I sign."

"I can see how someone could say, 'Well, how did you not know?' but when you're down here and you see the volume of cases, you can understand how the associate judge is not aware always of what the presiding judge is doing and vice versa," she said.

Craig McDonald, director of Texans for Public Justice, a liberal watchdog group that has advocated for changing the judicial selection process, said the incident "points to the need for reform in judicial elections."

Judges "get money from special interests and, just like politicians, there's a presumed quid pro quo in that money," he said.

McGill's divorce case has been reassigned to Judge Denise Pratt's 311th District Court.



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