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Strip club clout? Four recommended by bar owner got hired by Blagojevich administration

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD-Perry Mandera might not be a well-known name in most circles.

But when he tried to get people a job in then-Gov. [Rod Blagojevich's](http://www.nexis.com/search/XMLCrossLinkSearch.do?bct=A&risb=21_T21276285735&returnToId=20_T21276285756&csi=11064&A=0.055031576329140464&sourceCSI=162599&indexTerm=%23PE0009ULK%23&searchTerm=Rod%20Blagojevich's%20&indexType=P) administration, it seems his name carried weight, according to records kept by Blagojevich aides.

Hundreds of clout-heavy political sponsors turned to Blagojevich in the early days of his tenure as governor, asking him to give friends, family members and supporters state jobs, promotions and appointments, the secret hiring database obtained by the Chicago Sun-Times shows.

Most of the sponsors were politicians. But not Mandera. He's the president of a company that owns VIP's A Gentlemen's Club, a topless bar on the Near North Side.

The electronic records maintained by Blagojevich's Office of Intergovernmental Affairs -- his patronage office -- between 2003 and 2005 identify Mandera, 52, of Glenview, as the sponsor for nine state job applicants.

"I have no knowledge of what you're talking about," Mandera told a Sun-Times reporter who asked about the Blagojevich jobs list bearing his name. "This is the first time I'm hearing about this."

Four of the people on Mandera's list wound up getting state jobs, the records show.

After being read the list of names credited to him, Mandera said he didn't speak with Blagojevich about getting anyone hired.

"I never talked to him about one job for anyone whatsoever. Ever. Never," Mandera said.

But he did recall pitching someone for a job with the late Chris Kelly, who was a key Blagojevich adviser and campaign fund-raiser.

"I talked to one person at one time, but that's drawn way out of proportion," Mandera said. "I believe I spoke to Mr. Kelly about one of those names, a minority individual. But that was it."

Mandera -- who is the ex-husband of state Sen. Iris Martinez (D-Chicago) -- declined to identify that person.

Kelly committed suicide Sept. 13, days before he was scheduled to turn himself in to begin an eight-year prison sentence for corruption.

Mandera wouldn't talk in detail about any conversation he had with Kelly regarding a job in the Blagojevich administration.

But any such talks would have had to have taken place at a point when Mandera was in hot water with the federal government. His Northlake trucking business -- called the Custom Companies -- was sued in May 2002 by the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in a sexual harassment case that resulted in a $1.1 million fine against the company in 2007.

The government proved that female sales representatives of Mandera's trucking business were required to entertain clients at his previous strip club, called Crazy Horse, Too.

"Defendants' actions were reprehensible," U.S. District Judge Harry D. Leinenweber wrote in an opinion sharply critical of Mandera.

"There was evidence of repeated touching . . . sexually explicit comments and jokes, sexual advances, and a sexually charged atmosphere. . . . The harassment came from employees in positions of power."

Mandera also was busy in another legal venue, fighting the City of Chicago in a case that went to the Illinois Supreme Court after Crazy Horse, Too had its liquor license revoked for violating a city ordinance barring the sale of alcohol in adult-entertainment businesses that featured all-nude dancers.

That case exposed ties among the club, Mandera and a family linked to organized crime in Chicago.

The court's 2006 opinion noted that Mandera employed Fred Pascente, a reputed Chicago mobster, at Crazy Horse, Too between 1995 and 1999. Pascente's son was an assistant manager at the business who is quoted in court documents as having described Mandera as "a family friend."

Fred Pascente, a former Chicago cop, was convicted of mail fraud in 1995. He is listed in the Nevada Gaming Commission and State Gaming Control Board's Black Book, which bars him from entering any Nevada casino, based on his federal conviction and for being "an associate of the Chicago organized crime family."

Mandera has his own Web site, which lists his trucking company's philanthropic efforts but doesn't mention his adult-entertainment business.

So how might a philanthropic sort who owns a topless bar have had an in with the Blagojevich jobs machine?

Mandera repeated his assertion that he never asked for anything from the former governor, who's facing trial on federal corruption charges.

"My guess is there are people who are writing things in there where they aren't supposed to be," Mandera said. "I don't know what did or didn't go on down there. I never had any participation.

"It's an interesting thing, and I really don't want to get involved knowing [Blagojevich] has a case coming up in the near future."