

Florida 'cowboy' gallops into Alaska politics

'STOP THE CORRUPTION': With fistful of money, Vic Vickers grabs the spotlight.

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Raymond "Vic" Vickers, the Florida transplant dishing out \$1 million in a quixotic bid for the U.S. Senate, is running on a "stop the corruption" platform.



But as recently as 2005, Vickers himself was touched by scandal down in Florida. There were lawsuits, countersuits and allegations that Vickers had urged an associate to romance an elderly widow to secure control of a shipping company.

And there were earlier troubles, dating back 25 years to accusations of influence peddling and exerting pressure for campaign contributions in Florida.

Vickers says he never did anything wrong. He wasn't charged with wrongdoing. "Time has proven that I was right," Vickers said. "Time has proven that I stopped corruption."

"My work in Florida is finished but there is a lot of work to be done in Alaska." Questions still dog him. How did he get so rich? Why run for election here, 3,500 miles from where he built a career in law and business and worked on

political campaigns? Isn't he just throwing his money away?

Vickers, until recently a registered Democrat and a man who expresses little use for either major party, is one of six challengers taking on indicted U.S. Sen. Ted Stevens in Tuesday's Republican primary.

Almost no one in Alaska had heard of Vickers before he began blasting away at Stevens in a relentless barrage of TV and radio ads over the past month. His picture is plastered on city buses.

The Washington Times called Vickers "a maverick millionaire" who would be a campaign footnote at any other time.

But this year, Stevens is in the race of his life as he battles a seven-count indictment that accuses him of hiding more than \$250,000 in gifts and home renovations received from oil executive Bill Allen. The main Republican challenger is Dave Cuddy, a former state legislator and former bank president.

Vickers is 59, a lawyer, businessman and author of a scholarly book called "Panic in Paradise: Florida's Banking Crash of 1926." A second book, "Panic in the Loop," about Chicago's banking crisis, is set for release early next year, and one about oil and Alaska is in the works. He has four degrees from Florida State University: bachelor's in criminology, master's in international affairs, law degree and doctorate in history.

In January, Vickers moved to Alaska. He said it wasn't to run against Stevens but to finish his book on oil and gas. He would have moved here sooner, he said, but was caring for his mother, who had cancer and died in 2007.

He said he became outraged over all the corruption. Thirty minutes before the June 2 filing deadline, he jumped into the race.

He's now settled here with his wife, Sandee, daughter Jane Taylor, 5, and the son he always calls Little Vic, 3, plus four dogs, including his late mother's Jack Russell terriers, Eleanor and Franklin.

His campaign communications director is an environmentalist county commissioner from Tallahassee who flies back to Florida for meetings.

To finance the campaign, Vickers said, he took out a \$500,000 line of credit on acreage he owns bordering a state park in the Tallahassee area. Then, a couple of weeks after Stevens was indicted, he decided to pump in more money and took out a \$600,000 mortgage on the house he bought in West Anchorage, which is assessed for property taxes at \$550,000.

Vickers is land rich with numerous rental properties and six homes: two oceanfront homes on Neptune Beach in North Florida; a house and cabin on eight acres in Tallahassee; a home in Scottsdale, Ariz.; a condo in Sundance, Utah; and the place where he now lives in Anchorage's Turnagain neighborhood.

He provided copies of tax returns going back to 2002 that show income of \$667,000 to \$925,000 a year, counting what he made as a lawyer and rental income. Last year, his income was \$852,428 and he owed \$226,574 in federal income tax, according to the tax return.

CALL OF THE NORTH

His "Take back Alaska" TV ads can come across like a "Saturday Night Live" parody: "I'm Vic Vickers and I'm running against Ted Stevens to stop the corruption." He's more relaxed in person.

"I like to describe this race as the first round in a 15-round ... boxing match," Vickers said, sipping a Miller Lite at the Hotel Captain Cook last week. "I'm not saying I'm Muhammad Ali but if I knock out Sonny Liston first round, you know, that would be helpful. That may not happen. But the most important thing is to change the system and make sure that Alaskans get their fair share of oil revenues."

He admits he stumbled last week on the Dan Fagan radio show when Fagan described Maria Downey and John Carpenter, the longtime KTUU news and sports anchors, as speakers of the Alaska House of Representatives and Vickers didn't know he was being fooled. "I blew it," he said.

Vickers grew up on the Alaska mystique, hearing stories from his dad, a Navy chief petty officer stationed in Kodiak during the Korean War. His father died when he was in high school.

"We kind of took him under the wing," said his high school football coach, Hal Boney. "I was kind of like a daddy to him, so to speak."

In 1970, Vickers called his old coach to tell him he was going to hitchhike to Alaska. "I said when you get there, go to the Supreme Court building and see my brother. I'll call him and tell him you're coming," Boney said.

The brother was Alaska's chief Supreme Court justice, George Boney, namesake of the old courthouse. Vickers lived with the family, worked for Boney, drove the justice around, went to meetings with him. Like an "aide-de-camp," Vickers says.

Vickers says "The Chief" urged him to go to law school and return to Alaska to give back to the community. He thought he'd do it alongside his mentor. But in 1972, Boney drowned at age 42 after his sailboat capsized on Cheri Lake in the Mat-Su.

Vickers may not know Alaska celebrities, but says he has studied the issues. His views don't always match the conservative line.

He supports the feds listing polar bears as threatened. He opposes aerial wolf hunting. He backs an all-Alaska gas pipeline. He says if elected, he'd hire forensic auditors and other experts to study oil taxes and revenues in Alaska and use the bully pulpit to push for Alaskans to get more from the resource.

MAKING MILLIONS IN THE SUNSHINE STATE

In Florida, Vickers made good.

In his 20s, he latched onto a rising Democratic star named Gerald Lewis, who became the state's elected comptroller -- the top fiscal watchdog. Vickers became assistant comptroller.

Florida news accounts say Vickers was accused of shaking down financial interests for campaign contributions for Lewis. Vickers says he never did that. He was never charged.

He left to start his own law practice at age 29. He did no business before the agency for a year -- his choice -- to avoid a conflict, he says.

But after that, he built up a lucrative practice representing banks and other financial institutions as well as those seeking state approval to start up, he said.

By the early 1980s, he and his former boss had an ugly falling out.

Lewis ordered the Florida Department of Law Enforcement to investigate whether Vickers used his influence in the comptroller's office to benefit his banking clients, according to news reports from the time.

"Totally false, totally false, totally false," Vickers said.

It was Lewis who lost his moral compass and tried to shake him down to buy swamp land from his wife, Vickers said. Efforts to reach Lewis were unsuccessful.

No one was ever charged. In 1994, Lewis was voted out, and a Republican -- a retired general -- backed by Vickers won.

In a story after Stevens' indictment, the St. Petersburg Times said that in the early 1980s, "Vickers carried the whiff of political controversy."

Jim Minter, who worked for Vickers' old boss Lewis for a year, told the newspaper he laughed when he heard of Vickers' election bid. He called Vickers "kind of a cowboy," a bulldozer who would "flat run over people," the Times reported.

"He doesn't seem to have lost any of his brash approach to life," Minter told the newspaper.

'STEAMY SOAP'

In 2002, Vickers took an ownership interest in a Florida shipping business that had been owned by a Norwegian named Hans Hvide. Now, after a big court fight with Hvide's widow, Anne, he essentially owns Eller & Co. Inc., which handles baggage for cruise ship passengers, serves as a ship agent in port and, through a subsidiary, is a terminal operator in the Port of Miami.

In a 2005 story, The Miami Herald described the legal disputes as "straight out of some steamy afternoon soap, complete with allegations of corporate fraud and romantic treachery."

The company president, Louie Wainwright, said in a deposition that Vickers suggested he marry Anne Hvide to win control of the company, the story said.

Vickers says that's not true, but that Wainwright and Hvide became lovers and were living large off the company credit card.

"Have you seen the racketeering suit I filed against her?" Vickers said in the interview last week.

Hvide countersued, accusing Vickers of milking millions from the company in legal fees and cutting her off from monthly trust payments.

The case was settled on the eve of the racketeering trial, according to Vickers. Vickers ended up with ownership of Eller & Co., but the company must pay into a trust that provides Anne Hvide a generous income stream for life.

Vickers still earns money from legal billings to Eller Maritime Co., a holding company. His candidate financial disclosure says he made \$744,000 in legal billings last year. His only client is Eller Maritime and related entities, but that's not a conflict of interest, he said.

"First of all, I own the company," Vickers said. "In effect, I'm representing myself." Meanwhile, Eller & Co. is behind in fees to the Port of Tampa, where it's the agent for Carnival Cruise Lines. It owes \$1.2 million in passenger fees, of which \$821,000 is past due, according to the port.

It's not uncommon for an agent to fall behind while waiting for clients to pay up, but the amount owed by Eller is substantial, port spokesman Andy Fobes wrote in an e-mail.

Vickers said the bill will be paid but the real problem is "predator practices" by a competitor. He's preparing a \$200 million lawsuit, he said.