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METRO

TUESDAY, APRIL 28, 2009 | SECTION B

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THE PLAIN DEALER

PHILLIP MORRIS



Give Johnson another chance

Jeff Johnson is a fighter. You have to give him that. After he was stripped of his freedom, his dignity, his good reputation and his license to practice law, he was written off for dead.

After the once-rising political star was found guilty of extortion in 1998 and sentenced to 15 months in federal prison, the final chapter on his political biography seemed cast in iron.

But that was not the case. Johnson's back. He's running for Cleveland City Council, and he has a good chance to win.

Don't call it a rehabilitation tour. Johnson said he's returning to his political roots to serve, not to seek redemption. He said he's back at "square one" because he never stopped believing that he would one day return to a life of public service.

"I spent nine months cleaning showers and face-bowls for 19 cents an hour," Johnson said over breakfast Monday morning. "That gave me plenty of time to reflect on my temperament. I came to understand that underlying my problems of the past had been my arrogance.

"I'm a better person now. I've learned the power of humility."

The Ohio Supreme Court last week reinstated his suspended law license. But perhaps the most fortuitous twist for Johnson happened two weeks ago, when Ward 8 representative Majority Leader Sabra Pierce Scott suddenly resigned, opening a huge political vacuum.

Johnson has the name recognition, the experience, and the drive to make himself a formidable candidate. He still retains the type of ambitious vision rarely seen in City Council.

There still remains the issue of the tape, though.

In the current climate of public corruption and continuing federal investigations, former State Sen. Johnson's spectacular downfall, caught on video with his demanding money from an Arab merchant in exchange for help in obtaining lottery and liquor permits, will continue to reverberate.

Questions will linger: Has he really changed? Would he betray the public trust again?

If you happen to live in Cleveland's Ward 8, you will soon confront the questions directly. Starting next week, Johnson plans to start knocking on doors and appealing to residents to send him back to City Council.

He won't shy away from his past. He said he looks forward to the opportunity to explain to voters how he has changed for the better and how he hopes to help move the ward and the city forward.

Johnson is one of the most politically talented people I've met. As a strategist and political

Mentor teacher charged with rape

Student reports 2007 attacks

JOHN CANIGLIA
Plain Dealer Reporter

MENTOR — A 10-year Mentor music teacher was charged Monday with sexually assaulting a student over a six-month period, the first attack in a room at Memorial Junior High School in 2007 during a summer band camp, police said.

Barry Valentine, 35, a teacher at Orchard Hollow and Sterling Morton elementary schools, was arraigned on a rape charge in Mentor Municipal Court. A judge set his bond at \$300,000.

His attorney, Mark Zicarelli, declined to comment. Police said the investigation continues, and they are uncertain whether there were other victims.



Valentine was arrested Friday night, marking the third time in less than a year that an inappropriate relationship between a teacher and a student in the Mentor district was revealed. One teacher, Maggie Laughlin, was sentenced to three years in prison last summer for

unlawful sexual contact with a minor. Valentine was arrested Friday after the student told authorities about the attacks.

"I am so grateful this young woman found the courage to come forward and tell her story to her family and to the police," district Superintendent Jacqueline Hoynes said Monday.

The district is "outraged and saddened," Hoynes said, that a teacher is accused of abusing his

position of trust.

She said the student senior at Mentor High attended an assembly for seniors that discuss rears and the students' first

One of the topics included need to discuss things a past openly.

The girl told her boyfriend about Valentine, and urged her to speak with her, Hoynes said.

SEE ASSAULT

SPECIAL HELP



SCOTT SHAW | THE PLAIN DEALER

Barbara Leadbetter and her daughter, Teela Kelly, 12, read outside their home. Leadbetter is among many parents who have asked Legal Aid for help in getting special-education services from the Cleveland schools.

Doctors, lawyers team up to aid students

Learning disabled get a boost

THOMAS OTT
Plain Dealer Reporter

Doctors and lawyers are double-teaming the Cleveland schools' special-education offices.

MetroHealth Medical Center pediatricians who suspect that their low-income patients suffer from learning disabilities are referring families to Legal Aid lawyers with offices in the hospital and three neighborhood health centers. The lawyers then pressure the school district to provide what can be costly services.

The collaboration, known as the Community Advocacy Program, began in 2002 but gained momentum as it added sites and attorneys. The advocacy

program took on 117 special-education and other school cases last year, up from 37 in 2006. Up to three-fourths of the cases involved the Cleveland schools.

"It's jumped tremendously," said Robert Walsh, the Cleveland district's executive director of special education.

Walsh said he added an employee this school year just to help with the volume. Demand also has swamped the three Legal Aid education lawyers, forcing two to temporarily stop taking new cases early this year.

Cleveland's alliance, underwritten by the United Way, foundations and law firms, was one of the first in the country, said Ellen Lawton, executive director of the Boston-based Na-

tional Center for Medical-Legal Partnerships. Such cooperation now exists in 80 cities, Lawton said.

The Community Advocacy Program helps poor people of all ages with a variety of legal issues that pile up and make it hard to lead healthy, productive lives. Special education is probably the No. 1 concern, but lawyers also handle tasks such as appealing denial of Medicaid eligibility, and hounding landlords to clean up mold and lead paint.

Legal Aid also takes on suburban and charter schools, but the Cleveland district, because of its size and poverty, generates most of the partnership's special-education cases.

The number of district students in special education has remained steady, but the percentage has climbed as other

children abandoned the city's public schools.

Nearly one in five Cleveland students gets customized attention for all or part of the day, compared with less than 15 percent statewide.

MetroHealth's pediatricians watch for signs of disability during checkups. If doctors detect problems in intellectual development or behavior, they write referrals for legal counsel.

"When a child comes to see the doctor, the first question is, 'How are things going at school?'" said Legal Aid lawyer Mallory Curran, who keeps hours two days a week on a MetroHealth pediatrics floor. "The medical doctors are such good screeners."

Curran proposed the program after learning of a similar setup in Boston.

SEE SERVICES | B3

'Supercop' Simone helps bar a suspect

He spots some in police station

MARK PUENTE
Plain Dealer Reporter

A Cleveland dope sniffer police said found the city corners to be too dangerous to crack cocaine — a police parking lot.

Anthony Sears, 31, charged with drug crimes earlier this month in an incident in the rear lot of the 2nd District headquarters on Fulton Road. Se officers that nobody expects dealers to sell drugs at the station, Commander Keit said.

It was an off-duty officer a flair for catching crooks the limelight who spotted in the parking lot.

Patrolman James Simone has been nicknamed "Super" and was a recent finalist award on the television "America's Most Wanted," officers to Sears.

"He wasn't aware that was on the prowl," Sulz laughing. "No one else I stuff happen right in front of them. It's amazing."

This is what happened, ing to police:

Sears was a passenger sitting at the police station April 13 when Simone him. Simone saw Sears from the car and run down Avenue. A gun fell from waist. He stopped, around and grabbed the

Simone, a 36-year veteran the force, was in plain and in his own car. He caught and gave them a cripson of the suspect. found Sears sitting on a p Bush Avenue. He told p was waiting for his girl pick him up. But the hom said he didn't know Sears.

SEE DRUG

COUNTY IN CRISIS

FBI gathers campaign finance records of four

Judge Russo named for 1st time

JOE GUILLEN
Plain Dealer Reporter

Federal authorities investigating possible corruption in Cuyahoga County retrieved all available campaign finance records Monday for three elected officials and a former Parma Board of Education member.

FBI agents delivered an unsigned subpoena to the Board of Elections last Thursday seeking campaign finance reports dating to Jan. 1, 2003, for Commissioner Jimmy Dimora, Auditor Frank Russo, Probate Court Judge Anthony Russo and J. Kevin Kelley, who works for the engineer's office and resigned from

the Parma school board in March.

Judge Russo, whose name had not publicly surfaced in the investigation until now, said Monday that the FBI might have pulled his records because his brother is Frank Russo — a focus of the probe since it began last July.

"The judge, who was a county Domestic Relations Court judge from 1993 to 2006, said his fund raising has been legal and ethical."

"I am not involved at all in the FBI investigation," he said, adding that the FBI didn't need a subpoena to get public records. "It makes it sound more sinister

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Follow the evolving story of the FBI's public corruption investigation.

than it is."

The corruption investigation has spread throughout the county since it began July 28, 2008, when dozens of FBI agents raided the homes and offices of Frank Russo, Dimora and Kelley. Since then, suburban city halls, judges' chambers, the Parma school district and several contractors have been served with federal subpoenas.

Investigators are focusing on whether officials stashed public contracts in exchange for gifts, meals and work at their homes.

None of the county officials has been charged.

Kelley, however, quit his Parma school board post and is on leave from his job at the engineer's office.

"Voters must have confidence in their elected officials and my presence on the Board of Education has put that trust in jeopardy," Kelley wrote in an e-mail to Superintendent Sarah Zatik.

County Engineer Robert Klaiber declined to say why Kelley is on "approved leave" or when the leave began. Kelley made \$142,018 last year as head of the Geographic Information System Department.

Kelley's lawyer declined comment.

It is unclear why federal investigators waited nine months to



Dimora Frank Russo Anthony Russo Kelley

request the campaign finance reports, which are public records. Scott Wilson, spokesman for the FBI's Cleveland division, declined to comment.

Campaign finance reports show all money spent and raised by a political campaign. The Board of Elections retains the reports for six years.

"Anyone at any time has the right to access these records by law," Auditor Frank Russo said

through a spokesman. "I have problem for individuals to view or access these records." Rich Lillie, a lawyer representing Dimora, scoffed at the FBI's law request.

"They are just sending out subpoenas to everybody and the brother," Lillie said. "I don't much stock in it."

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SERVICES

FROM B1

Doctors, lawyers join to help students

MetroHealth pediatrician Robert Needman said doctors welcomed assistance with legal issues for which they have neither time nor expertise.

The school bureaucracy can intimidate parents who often have their own learning disabilities, Needman said. He said parents may simply go along when schools write off their sons and daughters as "bad kids."

"If the child had cancer, there'd be all sorts of help," Needman said. "If your child has dyslexia or ADHD [attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder] or any behavior-type problem, you're likely to get blame or you're likely to blame yourself."

Students whose emotional problems go undiagnosed may face repeated suspension from school, said Vanessa Cotere, a Legal Aid lawyer who works with doctors at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus. She knows of parents who lost jobs, and ultimately homes, because they had to constantly leave work to pick up children in trouble.

Curran said Legal Aid and the district have typically settled cases, though a few have gone to mediation.

Solutions vary. In some cases, the district agrees to have speech pathologists work with children who understand questions but can't quickly put their responses into words. At other times, officials might provide busing for mentally retarded students who cannot walk safely to school on their own.

Curran said the district special-education operation is capable but often acts slowly or resists changing students' individual plans.

The district is not unique in that regard. In a survey of par-

ents taken last year, a statewide medical-legal task force found that more than 25 percent of children had waited longer than six months for services to start and more than one in six waited longer than a year.

Barbara Leadbetter turned to Legal Aid more than four years ago. She said her daughter, Teela Kelly, then 7, suffered from seizures, ADHD and speech problems, but except for an hour of tutoring, she remained in regular classes at her Cleveland elementary school all day.

After appealing unsuccessfully to the principal for three or four months, Leadbetter turned to Legal Aid. Curran arranged a meeting with district officials and got Teela into smaller disabled-only classes.

"They weren't listening to me," Leadbetter said. "Just her presence alone changed everything."

Walsh said the district bases its decisions on what's best for each student, but special education has become increasingly expensive for all school systems. Cleveland spent \$23,100 per special-education student last year, about \$10,000 more than the average for all students.

The district has about 600 students in private day treatment or residential programs that can cost up to \$80,000 a year for one child. Walsh and Curran said, if possible, they try to keep children in city schools, a choice encouraged by federal and state law.

Walsh blamed some of the disputes with families on miscommunication.

For example, he said, administrators and teachers might mistakenly tell parents that their schools cannot provide certain services.

"Sometimes, as a district, we shoot ourselves in the foot," Walsh said. "We're educating our staff as we go along."

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter: tott@plaind.com, 216-999-5739

ASSAULT

FROM B1

Music teacher accused of raping student

Police Chief Daniel Llewellyn said the first incident took place at a summer band camp for elementary- and middle-school students at Memorial Junior High School, where Valentine was an adviser.

Llewellyn said Valentine

In the other cases in the district, Laughlin, 24, pleaded guilty to allegations that she performed oral sex on a student. She taught math at Shore Junior High School.

Jessica King, a 27-year-old English teacher at Mentor High School, resigned last month after having a relationship with a 17-year-old boy. Police determined that the relationship was inappropriate but not criminal.

Hoynes said the district is encouraging teachers and stu-



Kristin Clarke, a junior at Beachwood High School, learns by doing at the Gates Mills Environmental Education Center.

MARVIN FONG | THE PLAIN DEALER

Environment plus education

Students at Gates Mills center learn green gardening

GRANT SEGALL
Plain Dealer Reporter

GATES MILLS — Kristin Clarke thinks worms and waste can help to save the world. Scooping a handful of both — wriggly creatures breaking down coffee grounds, eggshells and more — the Beachwood 16-year-old says, "You can help the environment with all this green."

As the economy shrinks, especially for blue-collar workers, several local horticultural schools have folded. But during the previous academic year, Kristin's Gates Mills Horticulture Center underwent a \$1 million renovation and expansion with an interest-free state loan. It also updated its mission and its name, now Gates Mills Environmental Education Center.

Through projects like "Global Warming," which won first place in a national academic contest in 2008, the center is training to-

morrow's florists and landscapers to spray less and harmonize nature.

"It used to be, 'We've got a swamp; let's fill it in,'" says teacher Ed Tuhela. "Now it's, 'Let's study the red-wing blackbirds.'"

Now the students are testing sprays based in soybean oil instead of petroleum. Now the misting machines use sensors instead of timers, so they spray only when necessary.

"Use less gas," Tuhela tells students. "Don't run at full throttle all the time. Mow in economical patterns."

But many of the school's traditions continue, including house calls. For \$75 per visit, students will work a local yard for a couple of hours. They're all booked up for this spring and will start on Sept. 1 to make appointments for the fall.

Their workplaces include one of Gates Mills' grandest estates. Blowing leaves alongside some

students recently, caretaker Dennis Mastrangelo says he likes helping to teach them the trade on his 30 acres. Besides, "They get a lot done in a short period."

Students have also done free cleanups in Mayfield at senior citizens' homes and public sites.

The center has eight staff members, including two with fitting names: director Becky Gardner and virtual learning coordinator Nancy Farmer.

The school opened in 1974 on 27 high acres that used to hold a Coast Guard station. It's part of Excel Technical Education Career Consortium (Excel TECC), which serves the school districts of Aurora, Beachwood, Chagrin Falls, Mayfield, Orange, Richmond Heights, Solon, South Euclid-Lyndhurst and West Geauga.

Most students attend for two years, splitting their days between horticulture and traditional academics, either at their district's school or on the center's computers. Some students earn

Open house

The Gates Mills Environmental Education Center will hold a springtime open house and plant sale from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Friday, May 15. The public can also buy plants during regular school hours. The school is at 390 County Line Road, Gates Mills, 440-995-7550, www.mayfieldschools.org/exceltecc/webtecc/environment.htm

credits simultaneously at Cuyahoga Community College. They say they like giving nature a hand.

"You find a yard that's nothing," said Mike Kalnasy, of Mayfield Heights. "We help plant and bring the life back to it."

Antonio Hart, 16, of Solon says, "It's relaxing. Don't have read too much. The only thing don't like are the bugs."

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