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# Politics and Gambling: A dangerous union

Recent history proves that the unbridled pursuit of money brings casino advocates in league with those who seek unbridled power.

Political strategy first became obvious during the 2006 General Assembly with the Kentucky Liquor Education Project (KEEP) Board Chairman raising \$50,000 in campaign contributions for one senate candidate in Louisville's Feb. 14, 2006 special election to fill a vacancy in the state senate. The campaign contributions turned out to be a facade for KEEP's usage as observers wondered what KEEP leaders were thinking by dropping that much money into a local special election.

At that time, Kent Ostrander, executive director for The Family Foundation, commented, "We had been saying for months that the proposed \$1.25 billion of annual revenue for casinos would ultimately corrupt government. We just didn't expect this type of big-money, political influence before the casinos arrived." Editor's note: This year the proposed annual revenue/stress losses is claimed to be \$1.429 billion.

With the members of the 2006 General Assembly cool to the issue of expanded gambling and casinos, it seemed that KEEP members believed they could display financial clout in the special election and thereby intimidate other legislators to get on board with their proposal during that session. But the move backfired in the session, angering Senate Leadership and, in particular, Senate President David Williams, who was quoted in the Feb. 1 Louisville Courier-Journal charging, "The gambling interests are trying to influence a special election for the Kentucky State Senate."

The senate candidate who received the money, former State Rep. Henry Clark, had said he wants "the people to decide." But evidently, given the \$50,000 price tag, KEEP members believed he was stronger for casinos than what had

been publicly perceived or stated. OR they were confident that he could be moved to be stronger for casinos.

The \$50,000 from KEEP contributors was reported by the Courier-Journal to make up half of the campaign's total income at the time. Yet, the Courier-Journal also reported that the other candidate, Debbie Peelen, said she had not been contacted at all by KEEP representatives to discuss her position on casinos.

With the first shot being fired by casino advocates in the handball political realm, an interesting dichotomy began to arise. As the senate race in Louisville was being campaigned, an unrelated but broad and significant group of ministers asked for a meeting with Gov. Fletcher to encourage him to stand against casinos. The overall battle began to look like the "bad guys" against the "saints" ... and KEEP leaders are not wearing the halo.

But then the battlefield widened further. During the session, then-State Democratic Party Chairman Jerry Landregran embraced gaming, for his cash-strapped party. After that, a key Democratic governor hopeful at that time — Attorney General Greg Stumbo — also began talking the casino talk, when he strongly pushed them in his speech at last year's Fancy Farm picnic on Aug. 5.

Then emerged another wrinkle in the saga: the fact that some influential Republican leaders and governor hopefuls were carrying the pro-casino banner. Clearly, Lt. Gov. Steve Pearce distanced himself from Fletcher and expressed his support of casinos. Other leading Republicans who were



Instructions: Drop influence money in slot

questioning Fletcher's re-election run turned out to be pro-casino. "The February 2006 skirmish has passed. There is a battle coming that will dwarf all policy battles of the last 15 years because some in both major political parties have been won-over by the casino interests," observed Ostrander at the time. And he maintained, "But I have faith that the people of Kentucky will stand strong against a casino takeover of the state — they are not stupid, and I think many leaders will be surprised."

## TESTIMONY

### "I felt like a single parent"

Living alone because gambling steals your husband, then takes his life, is the legacy of casinos.

Pamela Slone, a southern Kentucky resident, would have imagined that her husband could develop a gambling addiction.

Victor Slone was a lover of statistics who was certain he could defeat the odds. "He would never quit," Pamela said. "He would always hold on for the big one that was going to bring in all the money."

That futile hope led to thousands of dollars of credit card debt, time lost with his wife and four children, and stress on his family and on himself.

Now, Victor can't get that back — not with recovery programs or anything else. A heart attack claimed his life, two years after his addiction began.

"I never got a chance to ask him" Pamela describes her husband's gambling addiction as something that began as a hobby — another avenue of income. "I kind of progressed," Pamela said of Victor's computer wagering.

"Occasionally I noticed he had been spending more and more time [gambling]."

After several months the addiction began to take control of Victor's life. "He would come home from work, and if I didn't have dinner ready, he'd go

down and he'd study his picks from the night before and place his bets."

Pamela attempted to discuss with her husband his new hobby by asking him how he was doing or how much money he had made. But Victor was losing much more than he was making.

"I just consumed his time and his thoughts," she said. "But he just felt like he could get it down to a science. He was a very intelligent man, a calculating mind, very statistical. ... He would spend hours and hours and hours studying statistics."

And he kept it a secret from everyone. I couldn't go to a pastor or a close friend. He would have been just furious with me if I told people what he was doing.

"I felt like a single parent," Pamela said.

The Slones had four children — toward whom Victor would show even more irritation. In his last years, Pamela said, he spent very little time with her or the children.

Then she found the statement from their life insurance company, showing he'd borrowed \$500 against their policy. Pamela was stunned, but unsure how to

deal with the problem. Any questioning of anything he did would bring his anger toward her in return.

"I sat on that for about a week, just praying. What is going to happen here?" Pamela wondered, thinking that her husband would become infuriated if she confronted him.

"But I never got a chance to ask him."

Victor collapsed one night of a heart attack.

Remaining debts The consequences of Victor's addiction remained.

Most of Victor's life insurance money went to cancel those debts.

Pamela sometimes battles with resentment against Victor, especially for the lost time he could have spent with her and the children before his death. "But there's really no way to resolve it," she said. "You just have to move on in life."



Though Victor's addiction began with internet gambling, Pamela cannot imagine what people could undergo if more expansions were allowed, particularly casinos.

"[People] think about gambling in terms of local businesses and whether or not that money is going to help them or they are not going to get that money," she said. "But there are emotional factors that you just can't plot on a graph; wasted time and shattered trust."

If casinos come to Kentucky, Pamela suggests that even more individuals and families will suffer.

"There are going to be marriages torn. I see this as an addiction just the same as alcoholism," she said. "Yes, it was my husband's addiction, but it affected the whole family."

\* Names changed for privacy

## TESTIMONY

### Trusted employee rocks small business

Even good people can go wrong when confronted with gambling debts and gambling addiction.

Tom Beck has been in the trade since 1961, starting his own plumbing firm in Lexington in 1977. "The business has a progressive and a good clientele," Tom said, "so things were going pretty well."

At last he thought so — until an IRS agent showed up at his door on a Wednesday morning in February and said that Tom owed the government about \$50,000.

"It was straight and to the point that he wanted it," Tom said. "I told him there could be no way I owed that money. ... I figured that they had made a mistake somehow."

But the mistake was not the IRS'. That following Sunday, Tom's bookkeeper, "Becky," arrived at his house with a tearful confession: she had been writing business checks to herself for eight years to feed her gambling problem. And to cover some of it, she had had to pay the business's taxes.

Shattered family The revelation was crushing to Tom. While retelling the account, his voice wavered.

TESTIMONY by Jo Strong

### "I lost my mother to the casinos"

How can we even consider an industry that causes so much pain and destroys so many people?

Five years ago, my mother's "ladies" night at the Greyhound Dog Track in Cross Lanes, W.V., changed her life forever.

It was a coincidence in her Baptist church, Sunday school teacher and Girl Scout leader, she had started a special education Sunday school class back in the '70s, played in two bridge clubs and belonged to The Women's Club — an outstanding member of society.

That was until she found slot machines at the dog race track.

"Shangri-La" More than a decade later, my mother had gambled away over half a million dollars. She put my father in his grave by losing everything he ever worked for.

Though he had Alzheimer's, she would leave him for days to go gamble at the slots. After he passed away, she sold the house and continued to gamble until those proceeds were gone. She traded down her 2003 Saturn Vue for more cash to gamble, then traded the second car down again — and repeatedly — until she had no vehicle at all. She alienated friends and family by showing up on doorsteps at midnight begging for money. She hawked items that were passed down in our family. The former outstanding member of society had become a chronic gambler, living for the slots.

My three siblings and I attempted to get

"She'd been with us for 16 years," he said. "She was a friend of mine and a friend of my wife's. ... We would basically consider her our daughter."

Becky had cried on Tom's shoulder for a long time after she told him. She even worked a few days after her confession.

But, of course, her position could not last long. Tom had to find a new bookkeeper.

"It just devastates you. There's no other explanation for it. Your emotions run the gamut from anger to discouragement. You're hurt."

In retrospect, her confession explained the increased stress Tom had been experiencing in recent years trying to keep his business afloat with all the demands of the everyday business world. With money leaving through the back door of the business, Tom had redoubled his efforts and increased his hours only to be "rewarded" with a heart attack three years ago, followed by open-heart surgery.

Starting small Teresa Slone, Tom's accounts receivable manager and Becky's best friend, had known her for more than 30 years and knew of her small gambling ventures with her boyfriend. But both Teresa and Tom thought

"I started with bingo," Teresa said. "And then when the boys came [in Indiana], they started going to the boat every night, apparently — unbeknownst to me. She hid it well."

"And of course, we trusted her and we believed in her."

Now they've spent more than a year and a half trying to determine exactly how much Becky stole from the business. The total could be as high as \$750,000.

All of it is gone forever — lost to bingo halls and the riverboat casinos.

"She obviously felt she could get away with it," Tom said. "To do it for eight years and come in every day and

with a cohort in Charleston, W.V., then went to Caesar's in Indiana. There, she oversteered her welcome, and four days later the casino's security called me to come and get her. This time, I said 'No.'"

The only time the casino ever called was when she had lost all her money and was in their way.

My mother ended up at Wayside Christian Mission in Louisville, and my siblings and I made the very difficult decision to leave her there — the hardest thing I have ever done in my life.

But I thank God for Wayside. They gave her a warm, safe place and some much-needed counseling while she was there. She stayed there until Christmas Eve, and I brought her to my house for the holiday. Now she is back in Florida with my sister. For how long, who knows?

Keep it here? My mother's 16-year decline into addiction and despair is not the only case of gambling's destructive influence. I hope the people of Kentucky decide to "Keep It Elsewhere."

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just make conversation. ... It was just easy money.

But it did not take long for her easy money — "entertainment" to become an addiction.

Truth and consequences "She'll go to prison," Teresa said, her eyes moist. "I don't want to see her in jail because I can't see her surviving there — but I can't believe she's done this either."

On Easter weekend, two months after learning of her embezzlement, Tom helped Becky enter a rehab hospital. Afflicted with severe depression, her thoughts had turned suicidal.

"I agonized for four days before I called her parents."

Her life had been going well. Tom said, "Now what does she have to look forward to?"

All the employees were devastated — they felt betrayed because they were all working to make the firm succeed. But the business will move on, Teresa said. She wants to help Tom rebuild the business to be even stronger. But she said her world will never fully heal. She herself has entered counseling.

Most of all, Tom said, is the great lie that you can get something for nothing. "That's where the problem is," he said.

And the same deception afflicts those who buy dozens of lottery tickets, hoping to hit it big, he said.

As a businesswoman, even now working to rebuild what was lost through a close employer's gambling addiction, that viewpoint couldn't be further from his own, he said. "An honest day's work for an honest day's pay is what I desire."

"I see that there are two victims — Becky and myself," he concludes. "And I forgive her. The unfortunate thing is that all the casino folks talk about is 'the revenue they raise.'"

The only time the casino ever called was when she had lost all her money and was in their way.

My mother ended up at Wayside Christian Mission in Louisville, and my siblings and I made the very difficult decision to leave her there — the hardest thing I have ever done in my life.

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Tom Beck



Teresa Slone



Jo Strong

**The Kentucky CITIZEN**  
is published by The Family Foundation of Kentucky, a nonprofit, educational organization that works in Kentucky on behalf of the Family.

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