From Naples to Tallahassee: Rick Scott's improbable rise to Florida's governor

By RYAN MILLS, LESLIE WILLIAMS HALE

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NAPLES — On the first Saturday in April, State Rep. Tom Grady sat with his friend, neighbor and campaign finance chairman, Rick Scott, at a local Starbucks, chatting about politics and business.

Topics of conversation included the Obama administration, Tallahassee politics and Florida Attorney General Bill McCollum, the presumed Republican nominee for governor whose campaign Grady was supporting. They also talked in generalities, about Scott’s desire to one day run for office himself.

Nothing in the 2-hour conversation prepared Grady for the phone call he would receive less than a week later when Scott informed him he was running for governor.

“He said ‘Well, you said things in Tallahassee need to be shaken up a bit,’” Grady recalled. “I was not surprised he wanted to run. I was very surprised that he had determined at that time to run for that office.”

As it turns out, Scott had a few more surprises in store, as he came out of nowhere to not only oust McCollum in the Republican primary, but shock the country by beating Democrat Alex Sink in Tuesday’s general election. It was a win that once seemed improbable, if not impossible.

Nailing down exactly when the Scott campaign turned the corner from a well-financed curiosity to the real deal isn’t easy.
Was it mid-May when the Sink campaign responded to some Scott mudslinging with a 600-word statement first outlining his alleged failings at his former hospital company, Columbia/HCA? Was it late May when anti-Scott ads started circulating?

Or maybe mid-June when, for the first time, a poll showed Scott with a double-digit lead over McCollum?

Daniel Smith, a University of Florida political scientist, doesn’t believe Scott truly turned that corner until he won the primary.

“No one thought he was going to win,” Smith said. “All the insiders bet against him.”

Despite pressures exerted by the Republican Party of Florida, Smith said Scott assembled a top-notch campaign staff. And for a political rookie, Scott proved incredibly disciplined at staying on message.

“That’s what made him stiff, but it also made him very effective,” Smith said.

Even still, Scott was one of a handful of self-financed candidates across the country running during this election cycle — and one of the only successful ones. In California, former eBay CEO Meg Whitman poured a record $141.4 million of her own money into her gubernatorial campaign, only to be rejected by voters.

“I would say California and Florida are very different states, and they have a very different electorate,” said Kyra Jennings, Sink’s press secretary. “I don’t think California has ever been considered a swing state, but Florida always is.”

But just as much as Scott’s victory was about money, discipline and his underestimated political skills, experts say it was also about timing. On Tuesday, Republicans swept every statewide race.

“I can’t imagine a better year for him to have accomplished this,” Grady said. “I believe that was part of his calculus.”
However, of the victorious Republicans, Scott’s 1 percentage point margin of victory was by far the smallest. Before the election, polls placed Scott’s unfavorable rating near 50 percent.

“For a candidate to win with such high negatives tells you more about the political environment than the support for that particular candidate,” Smith said. “He should be well aware of that when he’s governing.”

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While many of Scott’s friends and supporters were surprised when he entered the race, they were less than shocked that he won.

Scott is a disciplined, methodical and process-oriented person who, once he has a plan, sticks to it, said Karen Bowling, the CEO of Solantic, a chain of walk-in medical centers co-founded by Scott in 2001.

“He’s a genius,” said Bowling, who has known Scott for nearly 20 years. “He’s the smartest person I’ve ever known.”

Grady and Bowling believe the accusations against Scott of wrongdoing at Columbia/HCA were overblown. Although the company was fined a record $1.7 billion for Medicare fraud, when it came to Scott’s involvement, State Sen. Garrett Richter said there was “more aroma than substance.” Scott was never indicted, and wanted to fight the accusations, Richter said.

“When any business settles a case with a lawyer,” Richter said, “they are motivated to settle, sometimes because settling is less expensive than fighting.”

John Schilling, a Naples resident and former Columbia/HCA reimbursement supervisor in the Fort Myers division office, called Scott a hands-on CEO during a September interview. So, he said, Scott should have known what was going on. It was for that reason that Schilling, a whistleblower in the Medicare fraud case and a Scott critic, said he was shocked Scott would run for public office.
But, Schilling said in an interview on Thursday, Scott ran an effective campaign, playing on what voters wanted to hear.

“I think that Rick Scott was effective in getting a message out there — true or not — of tying Alex Sink’s ideas and her campaign into (the idea) that she heavily supported Obama,” Schilling said.

Still, Schilling said he was surprised by the results of the election.

“I was disappointed in the people of Florida,” he said. “That the people of Florida elected him, that they elected somebody with his checkered past, that they didn’t really look at his integrity and character.”

Integrity and character became much-discussed in the gubernatorial race — accusations of impropriety flew both ways. Still, that’s not necessarily what voters were most concerned about, said Kevin Lanning, an associate professor of psychology and an expert on political psychology at Florida Atlantic University.

“I think that the typical voter is a very, very busy person who also is aware of our economic struggles right now, and that person often isn’t thinking in terms of, you know, Scott’s experience in health-care administration,” Lanning said.

When asked about the reasons for Scott’s win at a Wednesday press conference, Sink said she attributes it to the anti-politician, anti-Democrat mood of the country, as well as the overwhelming amount of money spent on the race. It is the latter factor that Lanning said concerns him.

“The nature of our system is such that money really matters a lot, and it’s hard to keep it out of the political process,” Lanning said. “When money goes into government, you get corruption, and when people get fed up with that, they elect ‘Good Government,’ with a capital ‘G’ — and people get fed up with that, because ‘Good Government’ is not necessarily fast.”
The result, Lanning said, is a pendulum effect, back and forth between two extremes. Asked whether he believes large amounts of money and corruption always go hand in hand, Lanning acknowledges that a candidate funded by vast amounts of money from shadowy political forces is more disconcerting than one who self-finances, like Scott.

“Though that does lead one toward oligarchy, I guess,” Lanning said. “I think it can be pretty intimidating. I think the effects are subtle and pervasive — and they can’t be good.”

But Scott’s case is unprecedented in Florida, and the long-term effects will remain to be seen — whether voters will return to electing more traditionally funded candidates in the future, or if Scott’s victory heralds a new era of political candidates elected by the virtue of their own bank accounts.

Connect with Ryan Mills at naplesnews.com/staff/ryan_mills and Leslie Williams Hale at naplesnews.com/staff/leslie_hale

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