

ROBBOB

If I had scheduled a news conference to announce I was a pedophile and was looking for young meat, I undoubtedly would have attracted more attention from the local media. In total, three local media establishments were represented in Room 181 of the State Office Building when I walked to the podium to announce my candidacy for the Governor of Minnesota on Friday, April 2, 2010. The alternative weekly *City Pages* sent a reporter, there was a local freelance writer doing a story for *The Liberator*, a newspaper focusing on divorce issues nationally, and Sean Kelly, the ne'er-do-well reporter from Channel 6 was in attendance.

"You feel a bit like Woodward and Bernstein before anyone else took Watergate seriously?" I asked Kelly, smiling a bit as I did.

"Don't flatter yourself," Kelly quickly retorted, "This is much lonelier. Schultz wouldn't even consider the story."

I knew Sean from the University Club, where we were both members. We both spent hours at the pool and shared an occasional drink in the bar. While we were not what I would consider good friends, we certainly enjoyed each other's company and conversation. His presence at the news conference was perhaps more a favor to me than anything else.

"Thank you all for coming," I began. "My name is Robert Fleming, but you can call me Robbob. Today, I am announcing my candidacy for governor of the great state of Minnesota. I'm seeking this office with one major goal: to reform family law in this state. Like more than a quarter million people in Minnesota, I am a divorced parent who doesn't have physical custodial rights. The current system is a sham and needs to be changed. Not just changed but overhauled."

I paused to survey the room, figured I had everyone's captive attention, and then proceeded in a manner only I can accomplish.

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Some would call it 'foot-in-the-mouth' disease; I call it honest, straight talk.

"I could wax poetically like every other candidate about how I'm for jobs, health care and education," I began. "But who the hell isn't? There's a much bigger issue that needs this state's attention: Family Law reform. To suggest by its name that it is actually family-oriented might be one of the biggest misnomers of our time. It's a system controlled by many judicial hacks and slimy attorneys.

"The attorneys who practice so-called family law have a license to steal from their clients. Who are they kidding? These billing whores are not out to seek the best interest of their clients; they're out to prolong divorce cases as long as possible, so they can take as much money as possible. And parental rights? Bullocks. Our laws need to be changed to start with the premise of 50-50 custody and work from there.

"Oh, and by the way, I'm also for jobs, health care and education – just like John Kerry and every other candidate."

I surveyed the room, noticing a few of the videographers were laughing a little. Any reaction from them is a good sign. It usually indicates the subject on the other side of the lens has done or said something funny, intriguing or just really stupid.

"Now before I open it up to questions, I'm going to offer those of you who took time to show up today a little carrot. I'm going to give you answers to questions I'll occasionally throw out later in the campaign. I'll do them in order, so if you're sharp enough to hear the question, you'll be able to refer back to your notes today and have a minor, or perhaps a major scoop. Let's call it my tribute to John F. Kennedy, Jr., who did something vaguely similar when he launched *George* magazine.

"Of course. Not often. You better ask my ex. Notre Dame, of course. Not unless there's a good glass of wine involved.

"Now - questions."

"Have you discussed your platform with any divorce attorneys?" Kelly asked.

"They all support it," I joked, turning to my older son to note his reaction. "Seriously I have spoken with a few and think I might have to work a little more to get their full-fledged support."

"Do you really think you can win or is this just a publicity stunt to sell more copies of your book?" the reporter from *City Pages* asked.

"Of course, I think I can win. And if I sell a few more copies of my book, well, so be it. If they were capable, the other candidates could write their own books. But let me address this emphatically: this is not a publicity stunt. I'm focusing on a major issue that needs to be addressed and fixed."

"What made you decide to run?" the reporter from *The Liberator* inquired.

"I needed somewhere to channel the anger from my divorce proceedings, and I didn't think buying a gun was the right answer."

"You haven't picked a running mate yet," Kelly began. "What are you looking for in one?"

"Well, let's see - female, about five-foot-six, good figure, athletic. You get the picture."

I glanced in the direction of my campaign director Mickey Fadden, who was standing off to my right. His smirk and shaking head said it all. He had warned me not to be too flip and didn't believe me when I said I knew nothing different.

I fielded a few more questions, mostly innocuous standard political jargon, and then thanked the gathered hoard again for coming. My campaign was officially off and running. Okay, maybe jogging. Is that with a soft 'j'?

"How do you think it went?" I asked Mickey.

"You are what you are, I'll say that. I still think you'll be buying me drinks tomorrow."

"Don't kid yourself. I'll be enjoying libations on you just after five tonight."

Ours was a relationship that thrived on two things: drinking and betting. I bet him two drinks that my news conference would get at least a small shot on local TV.

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Mickey was a man made for politics, even though technically he practices law. That's right, an attorney is heading my campaign. I've always loved irony. Born into a feisty St. Paul Irish family in 1962, Mickey looks more like he's right off the boat. Fair skinned, blue eyes and a tint of red in his hair, he helped lead the campaign that elected Minnesota's first third-party gubernatorial winner in 1996. He contacted me via email after picking up my debut mystery, and shortly after that I began to really consider a run for governor. We'd only known each other for less than a year, but it was a friendship that was working. I respected his political acumen, his unfettered willingness to tell me I'm full of shit and his love for good beer. It was consumption of the latter that enabled me to concoct my political platform and Mickey to affirm it. Summit beer on the patio at Sweeney's on Dale Street in St. Paul can have that effect.

Mickey manages a volunteer staff of about twenty, a number we had to expand as the campaign gathered steam before my formal announcement. He receives a nominal salary, much less than a divorce attorney gets for filing a motion or returning an email. He's in it for the rush of being part of something political and something different. And, as I regularly remind him, the chance to be near me on a daily basis is priceless.

Olivia Steinberg is our only other paid staffer. She doubles as press secretary and designated driver. She came at the recommendation of Sean Kelly, who knew her from the time she spent as an intern at Channel 6. He assured me that, unlike most other interns, Olivia could handle his banter and ribald comments that were his regular ammo to test co-workers and decide who was worthy of future conversation. His prowess for sizing up people was confirmed during the three informal interviews I had with Olivia. Over bottles of wine on Mondays at Salut on St. Paul's Grand Avenue, she displayed a genuine enthusiasm for state politics and a commanding knowledge of the players and issues involved. She offered quick and constructive suggestions as to how I might consider amending my family law reform approach to avoid alienating every would-be voter in my first

month of campaigning. Oh, and the fact that she's read both my books and is really hot didn't hurt either.

Olivia actually looks like she could fit the physical description I offered Sean Kelly when he asked what I was looking for in a running mate. A 2002 graduate of the University of Minnesota, she possesses beautiful olive skin and dark brown eyes. Her body is the beneficiary of a regular regimen of running and three marathons, though I still have a better marathon time at just under four hours.

"Nice work, Olivia," I said, "Maybe next time you can get four reporters to show up. And you can't count Kelly either. That was my work."

"Shut your mouth, dickhead," she replied. She was wearing a black dress that cut just above her knees and black nylons. Simple but classy, not to mention incredibly sexy. Her black and white checked coat added to her presence.

"That's Candidate Dickhead to you."

"You've got your work cut out for you, Olivia" Mickey chimed. "Today you got just a small taste of the real Robbob. Wait 'til he really starts speaking his mind. We'll see if you can earn your pay then."

There were just a few remnants of winter visible, as the three of us walked out of State Office Building next to the State Capitol. The sun was shining brightly, creating a glare off the remaining snow.

"Shotgun," I barked as we made our way to the official campaign vehicle, otherwise known as a Dodge mini-van. It made up in efficiency what it lacked in character. "Keep it down. I need to make a few calls."

These were two calls I had savored from the first day I contemplated running for governor. There's something very underrated about vindictiveness.

"D.H. Millen," answered the pompous sounding voice at the other end of the phone.

"Hey, Dick Head," I blurted. "That's what D.H. stands for, right? It's Robbob, and I'm just calling to let you know I announced my campaign for governor this morning. You are going to be the poster-boy for my campaign. You're going to wish you never represented my ex, you fucking thief. Have a good day."

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I wasted no time waiting for a reply and instead hung up and called another number which unfortunately I had committed to memory.

"This is Connie Smelzth, how can I help you?" asked the lady with a slight lisp.

"You could take a cyanide pill to start and make this world a better place. It's Robbob, and I just talked to your boss. Figured I would call you, too, and take away some of your precious billable time. I'm running for governor and you're going to be the poster-girl for my campaign, the stupid minion who overbills and represents her clients poorly. In fact, I think I'll share with the media those three settlement proposals you turned down. Wouldn't the former Mrs. Fleming love to have one of those instead of that shit you ended up with? Fuck you."

I hung up not wanting to hear her lisping voice attempt a response.

Flush with a little self-gratuitous energy thanks to a few phone calls, my campaign *now* was officially up and running.

Hi, my name is Robbob, and I'm running for governor on the Reform Party ticket," I announced walking along the bar at Joe and Stan's, your classic neighborhood joint on West Seventh, not too far from where I live. It's a bar that includes a staple of blue collar types, mostly men in flannel shirts or oversized Vikings sweatshirts. Flat screen televisions, usually tuned to Fox Sports or ESPN or some other sporting event, line the room, and a number of high top bar tables fill in the rest of the bar. Based on the frequent congregations outside the front door, I'm certain this bar was a haven of smoke when one could still enjoy a cigarette or cigar legally inside a Minnesota watering hole. By the way, Coors Light on tap was the beer-of-choice thanks to specials during almost every sporting event, including Australian rules football. Well, maybe I exaggerate a little.

I wasn't a regular but figured a place I occasionally frequent would be a good place to start our campaigning. It's a scene that we

planned to repeat hundreds of times over the next few months, going from bar to bar, enjoying a drink or two at each establishment and talking with voters. It's a good thing Olivia was my designated driver.

Since candidates only go to bars on rare occasions, figuring alcohol to be taboo, I thought that so-called "Joe Six-Pack" image that the McCain-Palin ticket managed to mangle was good and put my own fresh touch on it. My experience with drinking left no need for practice, maybe just a little polish.

"What kind of name is Robbob?" asked a lady who I guessed was in her late thirties.

"It's a nickname I've had since college," I replied. "Aren't all the great ones known by just one name? Ali, Bruce, Sinbad, Seal, McLovin."

"Who the hell is McLovin?" her boyfriend asked.

"Oh, do you mean to tell me you've never seen the movie "Super Bad"? I highly recommend it."

Once I had worked the room, if you will, I attempted to engage a group at the bar and share some of my thoughts on both jobs and divorce reform. Three of them were divorced. Aided by drinks, the stories flowed. Within seconds, I knew I had won them over. I needed just a million more like them.

I handed out the equivalent of sports trading cards with a big photo of me on one side and some bio and campaign info on the other. Not the cheapest things to print but a good way to get some visual and name recognition, presuming people actually took them home and didn't just use them as coasters.

Just before five, I asked the bartender to turn one of the TVs to Channel Six, not the most popular request in a bar like Joe and Stan's. And there it was. Three stories into the news before the first commercial break. Sean Kelly sitting in the newsroom for a live report.

"Turn it up please, would you?" I asked.

"Sean Kelly joins us with more," read the perky blond as she tossed it to Kelly.

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"St. Paul author and small businessman Robert Fleming, known better to many as simply Robbob, today announced he was adding his name to the list of candidates running for governor on the Reform Party ticket," Kelly reported live from the newsroom, segueing into the taped portion of his story. "Robbob is basing his campaign on one major issue: reforming the state's family law, which affects thousands of married couples who get divorced each year."

The story cut to some clips of me during the press conference. I thought he chose some decent footage to use, and my loud blue pinstripe suit, white shirt and pink striped tie looked good onscreen, too. Then, as most reporters like to do, he inserted a clip from a University of Minnesota professor of Political Science.

"While his books are decent, I think his campaign is too small, underfunded, and a one-issue campaign based on divorce reform just won't cut it," intoned the self-perceived expert and media tool.

"Robbob is described by people who know him or have dealt with him as simultaneously intense, witty, driven and sometimes brash," Kelly read from the newsroom. "How long he can stay in the race is anyone's guess, but the longer he does, the more entertaining this campaign will become. In the newsroom, Sean Kelly, Channel Six News."

My Blackberry started ringing just as Kelly wrapped up his report. I glanced at the number and knew who was on the other end of the line.

"You owe me drinks," I said to Mickey. "And what does that bearded spank of a prof know? What a media whore. Did he fail to notice that two of my main priorities are jobs and taxes? And have you ever noticed he always does these interviews at his house? Doesn't he have a fucking office at the U? Wait, that might imply he actually works for a living."

"How many beers have you had so far? A little wound up already?"

"I'm fine. Just a little excited."

"Well, make sure the voters you visit tonight feel that energy and passion."

Rob Hahn

"Will do, boss. Remember you owe me drinks."

"Somehow I don't think you'll let me forget."

A round of applause broke out as I hung up my Blackberry. Not sure if it was for the report or what the patrons heard on my end of the conversation. Either way it felt good. If I've learned one thing over the last two difficult years it's to take pleasure in the small things in life.