

Tampa Bay Times

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What we didn't know before Jim Greer's ascent

By Michael Kruse, Times Staff Writer

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The 1993 DUI arrest of Jim Greer started as a 911 call from a woman in a drunken panic.

A police officer responded to a Shell station in Palm Bay shortly before 4:30 one morning that June. The woman stepped out from behind the building and into the light by the pay phone. Wet streaks of mascara ran down her face.

The officer asked her what had happened. She wouldn't say. He asked her again.

A white Chrysler convertible whipped into the parking lot. The officer recognized the driver as Greer, a City Council member, and he smelled like booze.

Greer looked at the officer and the woman and asked the woman where she'd been. He told her he'd been worried and looking for her everywhere.

The officer decided to check if Greer was as drunk as he seemed. He asked him to balance on one foot and walk a straight line and to say the alphabet. Greer swayed and flapped his arms to stay standing and couldn't get past the letter T. "If I hadn't had anything to drink at all," he told the officer, "I'd still forget the rest."

In November 2006, Charlie Crist, who had just been elected governor, made Greer his pick to be chairman of the Republican Party of Florida. The DUI was never mentioned.

Greer was so unknown that his soon-to-be staffers at the party offices in Tallahassee plugged his name into Google. Crist, who is running for U.S. Senate, knew him better than many — but not nearly well enough. Greer's DUI wasn't a mere misstep but rather one piece of a record of red flags.

Now Greer, 48, is charged with money laundering, theft and fraud. Authorities say he created a company to funnel to himself and an associate a cut of donations made to the party. His RPOF credit card statements say he spent his three years as chairman living a lavish lifestyle of private planes and luxury hotels. He was pressured to resign in January and arrested at his home in Oviedo in June when Florida Department of Law Enforcement agents led him handcuffed past his kids while they ate breakfast in the kitchen.

His current predicament is widely known. Much less discussed — in fact never before told — is how Greer ascended to such prominence in the first place. He is a man with limited education and a past that includes resume fibs and racy run-ins with the police — also, though, an undeniable ability to shake the right hands, meet the right people and charm the ones who had what he wanted.

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James Austin Greer was born on June 8, 1962, in Arlington, Va., but he grew up at least part of the time in Merritt Island in Brevard County.

One classmate from what was then Edgewood Junior High School remembers 13-year-old "Jamie" Greer as awkward and unpopular. "The heat would bother him," said Mark Foskey, who's now a police officer in Palm Bay. "He wouldn't go outside for recess. He was picked on."



Associated Press (2009)

Gov. Charlie Crist places a hand on Florida Republican Party chairman Jim Greer's shoulder on Jan. 10, 2009, as he urges state GOP Executive Committee members in Orlando to re-elect Greer to a full four-year term.

About a dozen other classmates don't remember him at all. Greer won't talk about that portion of his life or much of anything else. He and his attorneys didn't respond to repeated interview requests.

He was in essence an only child. His one brother is 15 years older. David Greer is a drummer on the Brevard music scene. "I'm a musician, and he's a politician," he said in September. "We don't have much to talk about."

Virginia Greer is now 86 and sick. Almost anybody who knows Jim Greer even a little talks about his relationship with his mother.

"His mom was always around," former Palm Bay Mayor Bob Devecki said.

She sat in the front row at council meetings, and if anybody challenged Greer, said Sue LaDow, a former council member, "she'd meet you outside and tell you what she thought.

"She told me, 'I want him to look his best. I have made sure he's been primed and polished to be in politics,' that that's what his father wanted from him."

His father was Buster Austin Greer. He fought at Guadalcanal in World War II and retired from civil service in Washington, D.C., after 31 years. Virginia Greer divorced him in 1982.

Jim Greer was a young man still living at home. Records suggest this was not an easy period in the life of the family.

In 1983, in Marion County, Buster Greer was 60 and broke when he lured back to his apartment a 19-year-old man whom the Sheriff's Office described as "exceptionally mentally retarded" and performed oral sex on him.

He pleaded guilty to sexual battery. He was sentenced to only 10 years of probation, the judge explained in the case file, in part because he was deemed to be brain-damaged from alcohol abuse and had a supportive family willing to care for him in Merritt Island. His ex-wife. His 22-year-old son.

Buster Greer violated his probation in 1985 when he got drunk and chased his ex-wife around the house with a hammer. He died in February 1987.

Jim Greer, no longer Jamie, moved from Merritt Island to Palm Bay in southern Brevard.

And in 1988, for the first time, he ran for public office. He lost a bid to be a state senator in an election that wasn't close. During the campaign, though, he had friends drive around jamming into the ground signs that read like announcements.

GREER IS HERE.

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In Palm Bay, where he lived from the mid '80s to the late '90s, he quickly forged a reputation as a determined entrepreneur and relentless political aspirant.

He started a business, Florida Beverage Law Consultants, which trained restaurant and bar workers to comply with the state's alcohol laws. It grew quickly. He joined the Chamber of Commerce. He joined the Rotary Club. He started a program that gave needy families turkey dinners.

"He was at all of the events and activities, just tireless," said Carl Weaver, a friend from Palm Bay.

"He gave you the impression when he met you that he was glad to know you," said Luke Lirot of Clearwater, a lawyer who worked for years for Greer's company.

"Whenever he walked into a room," said Devecki, the former mayor, "his head was up, he was shaking hands, and he had a smile on his face from ear to ear."

But Greer also was known by many as a regular in a bowling alley bar called the Crews Club and a topless joint called Flash Dancer.

He bought a small local magazine called Party Guide that covered area nightlife. Soon there was a long story about himself. He drove convertibles, fast, top down.

"Jim's personality," said Debora Kortbawi, an ex-girlfriend, "was to be the guy everybody wanted to be with" — a guy who bought a 32-foot boat he named *High Roller* and then a 36-foot boat he named *Sea King*.

When he first ran for City Council, in 1992, he had to fill out a questionnaire for the local papers. He said he had attended the University of Central Florida. Not true. Over two years, he took four classes at Brevard Community College, including American national government and criminal investigation. He claimed later to have graduated from Merritt Island High School. Also not true. He got a GED.

On the City Council, Greer railed against opponents, calling them "nonprogressive obstructionists." A letter to the editor in *Florida Today* described his political style as "continuous confrontation." Once, a citizen named Bonnie Cameron, who was in her 50s, suggested that Greer might recuse himself from a conversation concerning an adult entertainment law and a suit Flash Dancer filed against the city, considering the bar had been one of his company's clients.

"He was furious, red-faced," Cameron said. "He jumped up and started yelling and threatening me, that if I ever say anything about him like that ever again, I'd be the sorriest person that ever lived."

It wasn't until the DUI — to which eventually he pleaded guilty — that people in Brevard County learned from *Florida Today* about his driving record. It was remarkable already back then, and is only more so now, three decades of indifference to rules: careless driving, failure to carry his registration, failure to have proof of insurance, failure to appear in court, driving with a suspended license, speeding in Brevard County, Volusia County, Martin County, Madison County, Orange County, Columbia County, Leon County, Georgia, North Carolina, 53 in a 35, 75 in a 55, 80 in a 55, 87 in a 70.

Greer's DUI was no ordinary DUI, either: The distraught, disheveled woman was an employee of his. The woman, reached by phone, said the situation late that night on Greer's boat made her uncomfortable enough to run away — but that there was no assault. She resigned and moved to Georgia the following year.

Others say Greer could be tons of fun.

"We'd go somewhere, he'd make sure to flash his money," said Karen Svinareff, a bartender who used to party with him in Palm Bay. "He's buying, you know?"

"And he loved karaoke," said Joe Reilly, one of his best friends.

"Everybody knows Jim will pick up the microphone and start singing Elvis songs," said Gene Collins, another of his best friends. "He's a guy who likes to be on stage."

The parties at his home were some of the biggest and best in Palm Bay. Nobody had to bring drinks. But this wasn't thoughtless bacchanalia. The parties were part of a plan.

"He always had an elite crowd at his parties," business owners, City Council members, said LaDow, the former council member. "He made sure he wrapped himself with those he perceived to be in power."

Greer was one of the first with a Jeb Bush bumper sticker when Bush was running for governor. He got him to come meet the Rotary Club. His fellow Rotarians thought that was pretty neat.

None of this, though, is what many people in Palm Bay talk about the most when they talk about Jim Greer.

On April 19, 1994, according to a Palm Bay police report, a dancer at Flash Dancer performed for Greer for 15 minutes, at which point he asked if she wanted to come home with him. He told her he was a lawyer. Back at his house, she wore only a G-string because she "wouldn't mind exposing her beautiful body," she later told police, and they watched porn. The intercourse was consensual, except the woman asked him not to ejaculate inside her, which he did anyway.

The woman's husband took her to the police station because he wanted to know if this was rape. Greer was charged with nothing, and the incident didn't make the papers, but copies of the police report made their way around Palm Bay.

Eight months later, Greer proposed marriage, to a different woman, when he got down on one knee at a restaurant and the ring arrived on the dessert tray.

The wedding, to Francine Jean Greenwald on May 20, 1995, featured some 225 guests, trumpeters from Disney Productions and a horse-drawn carriage. A bridesmaid read from 1st Corinthians: "Love is patient, love is kind ..."

They had a daughter a year and a month after the wedding. They split that fall. The divorce was final by the following summer. And for almost a year and a half, according to a petition for a domestic violence injunction she filed on April 10, 1998, he harassed her with

phone calls to her office and home, told her he had an attorney who was going to "eat me up," had "the money to teach me a lesson," asked her repeatedly when she was going to say sorry and come back, and called her names like "trash," "slut" and "unfit mother."

A judge dismissed the petition 11 days later when she didn't appear at a court hearing.

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In the late '90s, Greer moved to Tallahassee to run his beverage consulting business, thinking proximity to politicians and lobbyists might help. This is when Greer met Crist, who then was the deputy secretary of the state Department of Business and Professional Regulation, and Greer did business with the agency.

Greer left Tallahassee and moved to Oviedo in 2003 to be closer to his ex-wife and daughter. Oviedo is different from sprawling, working-class Palm Bay, smaller and more agrarian with chickens wandering around downtown.

Greer's script was not so different.

Joined the chamber. Joined the Rotary. Met a lot of people in not a lot of time. Had another wedding.

He married Lisa Michelle King on June 19, 2004, at the historic Lakeside Inn in Mount Dora. They had met at McDonald's. They stood with tears in their eyes in front of a "huge" crowd, said Coy King, her father, before eating prime rib and drinking champagne from a fountain.

And he ran for and won a seat on the City Council later that year. Some of his signs said GREER IS HERE.

On the council, he pushed for an ordinance making it next to impossible for sex offenders to live anywhere in town, and people liked that.

What some of them didn't like: In a town parade, he didn't ride on the float with the other members of the council, choosing instead to ride in the back of his own convertible. One day at his office at the company he owned, then called Regulatory Compliance Services, he showed up in a new Mercedes and asked his staff if it made him look hot. In his run for re-election in '06, he spent more than \$27,000, breaking his own record, even though he ran unopposed.

He built a house in a brand-new subdivision called Ellington Estates. It cost almost \$400,000 and sat on a corner lot. That meant he could pick an address on either Ellington Place or Prestige Point.

Greer picked Prestige.

His parties were some of the biggest and best in Oviedo. He hired Dickens-style carolers from Disney for a Christmas party. He sang Elvis.

"He had good hors d'oeuvres, and he didn't water down his liquor," said George Viele, who met him through the chamber, "so he was a good guy."

The fast-living younger Greer of Palm Bay was a father of four in Oviedo. No more lurid encounters with women documented by cops. In interviews and e-mails, his father-in-law called him a good dad, his wife said he's "a loving father and husband," and even his ex-wife said they're now friendly.

In April 2006, Greer hosted at his Prestige house a fundraiser for Tom Feeney, the congressman who ended up losing in 2008. The suggested donation was \$250.

By then, Greer was heading up Crist's gubernatorial campaign, first in Seminole County and then all of Central Florida.

He stuck a Crist sticker on his 3-month-old baby for a photo for the *Orlando Sentinel*. He later gave his youngest son two middle names, James and Charles, first one for him, second one for Crist. He set up companies that did little except give money to the Crist campaign. Greer, his wife, his mother and those companies over two years managed to contribute some \$8,000. One employee from Regulatory Compliance, Michelle Pasciak, said recently on the phone that Greer gave her \$500 in cash so she could then write to the Crist campaign a \$500 check. If that's true — Greer's attorneys wouldn't comment — that's illegal. Records do show a \$500 contribution from Pasciak.

Greer helped Crist in his campaign in 2006 raise \$401,199 in Seminole County alone — five times the amount Jeb Bush got from the county four years earlier. Crist visited Oviedo nine times during the campaign, according to Greer, quoted in the *Seminole Chronicle*.

The decision to endorse Greer as chairman of the RPOF happened shortly after Crist was elected. Crist says George LeMieux made the initial suggestion. LeMieux was Crist's chief of staff then and is now in the U.S. Senate. He says that's true but that Crist was the one who made the decision.

"I put before the governor several names to be considered for chairman of the RPOF," LeMieux said.

"Greer," he said, "was the one Crist picked."

Crist's explanation?

"He did a good job" with the campaign, Crist said. "It's kind of that simple."

People who know Florida politics agree on what Greer saw in Crist. Power. They struggle more with what Crist saw in Greer. But usually they settle on this:

"Undying loyalty," Palm Beach County Republican Party chairman Sid Dinerstein said.

"Blind loyalty," said Tony DiMatteo, a Republican state committee member from Pinellas County.

Sharon Day, a Republican leader from Broward County and a national committee member, got a call from Greer shortly after Crist's election. He introduced himself and told her he was going to be the next chairman of the RPOF. It's an elected position, Day reminded him, even with Crist's endorsement.

"No, no," she remembers him saying. "Charlie Crist picked me."

"Well," she told him, "Charlie Crist can't pick you."

"No, you don't understand," Greer told her, she said. "I've already been picked."

Greer still had to get elected by state committee members at the RPOF meeting in January in Orlando, but already in late November, at a council meeting in Oviedo, he called himself "chairman-elect," according to the *Chronicle*.

"I've been told that there are three people who when they speak in Florida will make the newspapers," he said at the meeting. "And I am one of them."

Greer got elected in a vote that was closer than expected. He won, say state committee members, because the new governor got the benefit of the doubt.

"I was told this was the governor's handpicked man," said Allen Cox, a Gulf County state committee member and former RPOF vice chairman. "We never understood why in the world the governor would pick someone like Jim Greer."

"If the governor picked him," said Scott Plakon, a state representative from Seminole County, "I guess there's the presumption there isn't any big junk in his past."

On Jan. 27, 2007, Greer gave his acceptance speech at the party's annual meeting. He thanked his wife, his children, and his parents, "who taught me many important lessons in life and always believed that I had a destiny in public service."

"I have never wavered in my belief," he said, "that life's accomplishments, and at times failures, are of our own making. It is not the government's responsibility to provide opportunity. It is our individual responsibility to seek it."

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As chairman, the title was bigger, and the money was bigger. Greer was still Greer. Now he just sang Elvis at the Governor's Club.

He hung so many pictures of himself in the hallways of the party's offices that some of the staff started calling it "the hall of shame." His executive director commissioned a \$3,000 oil portrait of his boss. Greer called "men's only" staff meetings. He didn't want to be called Jim, or Mr. Greer, but Chairman. He wanted his wife to be called the First Lady of the Republican Party of Florida. He had staffers at events stand in front of the door to the men's room. Sorry, sir, the bathroom's closed. The chairman of the Republican Party of Florida is in there. He had instructions sent to the people hosting his appearances to have flavored bottled water and peanut M&M's waiting in the car. He wanted to drink bourbon whiskey poured only from bottles with specially ordered labels: "Maker's Mark, Private Edition: James A. Greer."

At an event in Pasco County, said Bill Bunting, a state committee member, he seated Greer near the back. Greer was livid.

"He wanted to be treated like King Tut," Bunting said.

Greer issued a statement about "living within our means" on March 8, 2007, a week after he spent \$2,447.87 on a car service in Washington and a week before he spent \$2,093.39 at the Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables. He put out a statement about cutting "wasteful spending" on Jan. 28, 2008, two days before he spent \$2,951.01 at the Capital Grille in Orlando. He told the *St. Petersburg Times* on Jan. 28, 2009, "In these challenging economic times, it's important that we constantly be looking at spending practices, just like every other Floridian," while he was spending three nights at the Vinoy in St. Petersburg for \$1,150.29.

The party paid for Greer to go to a Wayne Newton concert in Las Vegas and contributed to the costs of his son's baptism in Oviedo and birthday party in Cocoa Beach.

He told staff he didn't have to fill out a reason or purpose for his expenses, said Susan Wright, a former staffer who was fired after she groused about spending.

"I'm the chairman," he said.

He was re-elected in Orlando in January 2009.

"I am humbled," he said.

At that five-day party meeting, at Orlando's Rosen Shingle Creek resort, he spent \$15,334.98.

Greer only exacerbated a culture of lavishness that had already existed within the RPOF. Party leaders more or less rolled their eyes at his excess and bombast until Crist's Republican support began to erode. That made Greer an easier and more public target, and that's when whispers about his spending turned to talk about his spending, then finally to calls for his resignation.

He lashed out at those who challenged him, and those who started asking him to quit, accusing them of "libel" and "treason." And he lashed out at an assistant who was told to make a reservation for him at a spa but couldn't because it was booked.

He told her to call back.

"Tell them who I am."

Times researcher Shirl Kennedy and staff writers Adam C. Smith and Marc Caputo contributed to this report. Michael Kruse can be reached at mkruse@sptimes.com or (727) 893-8751.

About this story

This story is based on public records from Brevard County, Seminole County, Leon County and Marion County, the Republican Party of Florida and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, stories in the archives of the Oviedo Voice, the Seminole Chronicle and Florida Today, and interviews with people who knew Jim Greer in Merritt Island, Palm Bay, Oviedo and Tallahassee, including his ex-wife, the woman who made the 911 call and the police officer who responded.

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