

How my ex-hubby paid to be judge

Former wife claims cash & bribery 'package deal'

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In a shocking new twist in the exploding "judgeships for sale" scandal, the ex-wife of a disgraced Brooklyn Supreme Court judge has revealed details of a systematic payoff scheme that bought her husband his seat on the bench.

Tessa Abrams Mason alleges the couple spent nearly \$100,000 - some of it bribe money - to boost the legal career of her then-husband, former Supreme Court Justice Reynold Mason.

In a series of exclusive interviews, Abrams Mason implicated well-known Brooklyn Democrats in the deals - including former state Sen. Carl Andrews, who has close ties to Gov. Spitzer.

Brooklyn District Attorney Charles Hynes, who has been probing court corruption, was not familiar with Abrams Mason's story, said spokesman Jerry Schmetterer.

But Schmetterer added, "Based on the scope of our investigation, we take any allegations about corruption seriously."

The startling accounts were given to the Daily News over the past six months in dozens of interviews and in an explosive unpublished memoir.

Although other jurists have been caught up in the ever-widening probe, it is the details provided by Abrams Mason that make her story so compelling.

She tells how:

- * Her husband had to buy a package deal of payoffs to secure the party's backing.

- * Andrews allegedly took a \$5,000 payoff in an envelope at Mason's Brooklyn law office - for which no services were received.

- * Mason had to hire a campaign manager

and an election lawyer at the direction of the local party.

Once elected, he had to hire a law clerk chosen by the party.

"They didn't care if Mason was competent," his ex-wife, 46, told The News. "All they cared about was [that] Mason had a deep pocket and could raise funds and throw around money without asking questions."

Caught dipping into escrow

Her ex-husband was stripped of his post in 2003 after she told the state Commission on Judicial Conduct that he dipped into a client escrow account to fund the campaign - an accusation that the commission substantiated.

Mason, 57, now a real estate agent in Georgia, has been ducking court-ordered child support payments for years. Recently a New York state judge threatened him with jail if he didn't show up to explain why he hasn't paid up the \$200,000 he owed.

Reached by telephone last week, Mason vehemently denied the charges of his former spouse, whom he calls "a bitter woman."

"I never paid a bribe to anyone," he said. "What they do is meet with you [and say],

'If you want our help, you gotta do XYZ.' That's all they ever said."

"You work with them," Mason added. "You want to win. You bite the bullet and do what you have to do."

But his ex-wife's startling account of back-door deals and pay-for-play demands seems to mirror much of what Hynes has uncovered in a corruption probe now in its sixth year.

Hynes' work led to the toppling of once-powerful Democratic boss Clarence Norman and the indictment of three state Supreme Court justices and other elected officials.

Norman's lawyer said his client was focused on his next trial, due to get under-way today with jury selection. "Any other allegations are simply a scurrilous attempt to poison a jury pool," said attorney Edward Wilford.

First race an eye-opener

In 1994, Mason was a 46-year-old real estate lawyer just starting to make a name for himself in Brooklyn's West Indian community when he decided to run for the bench.

A native of Grenada, he had married Abrams Mason, who worked as his office manager and paralegal, a year earlier. The couple have three children.

Though Mason had dabbled in local politics, his entry into the judicial race proved an eye-opener for him and his new bride. In heavily Democratic Brooklyn, the primary was the real election and he faced stiff opposition.

Friends led him to pols with close ties to Norman. One of the first stops was a meeting with local Democratic district leader Marietta Small.

Small, who later held a top patronage post in Brooklyn Surrogate's Court, taught the couple the facts of life about judicial politics, Abrams Mason said.

"Small was not interested in money, but influence and power," she said. "Everyone else was interested in payoffs."

To get Norman's backing, Mason was told, he would have to take what his wife described as "the package deal."

That included a campaign manager selected by the bosses who would be paid \$15,000, an election lawyer who would get \$10,000 and inherit Mason's cases and clients if he was elected, and a law clerk handpicked by Small once he got on the bench.

"At one meeting, Mason was told you have to pay Andrews \$5,000 cash and make donations to other candidates," his ex-wife said. "Whatever money politicians asked for, Mason

had to have it right then and there. We ended up spending nearly \$100,000."

Not all of it was reported by Mason's campaign, she added. Campaign finance records reviewed by The News show Mason's campaign spent \$67,895.04.

But other expenditures, like the alleged payment to Andrews, "weren't accounted for in campaign records," she said.

At the time, Andrews was an active Democratic leader in Brooklyn and a close confidant of Norman. He was later elected to the state Senate, worked for Spitzer in the attorney general's office, but lost a bid for Congress despite Spitzer's backing.

Andrews was recently hired by Spitzer to work in his Office of Intergovernmental Affairs.

The Village Voice recently identified Andrews as the bagman for a bribe paid to Norman in 2001 to get another judge, Howard Ruditzky, a Supreme Court seat.

Andrews 'insulted' by query

Andrews, 50, did not return repeated calls for comment. But earlier, when asked about the Ruditzky allegation, he replied, "I'm insulted by the question and the implications behind that question. I guess my only crime is being Clarence Norman's friend. Guilt by association."

Yet Abrams Mason says she clearly recalls the day when Andrews showed up at Mason's law office on Glenwood Road in East Flatbush to pick up his cash.

"Mason was annoyed. He said, 'Why do we have to pay this guy \$5,000? What is he going to do for me?'"

As it turned out, nothing. She recalled, "Mason took money out of the right-hand drawer of his desk, where we keep our cash and records. He put the \$5,000 in an envelope and handed it to him. [Andrews] put it in his jacket pocket. He didn't stick around. That was it!"

"Mason and I thought he took the money to go neutral, because he did nothing. ... He didn't do anything for Mason's opponent either."

"We never saw him again, not even at a fund-raiser," she said.

In a telephone interview, Small also denied

any wrongdoing.

"I have no knowledge of anyone taking any bribes," she said. "I would not ever be a part of that. I would never be a part of anything like that. That's the God's honest truth."



Theodorakis for NEWS

Ex-Brooklyn Supreme Court Justice Reynold Mason found out early, his ex-wife says, that running for judge meant making big payoffs to pols and hiring people he was told to.

Abrams Mason insists thousands in cash went to politically connected operatives who supposedly spent it on such things as neighborhood get-out-the-vote campaigns.

Some of it went to district leaders who controlled large blocs of votes at local housing projects, where "the voters were told who to vote for, and this was a plus."

The support of Norman's army of regulars helped Mason eke out a win in the Civil Court primary by 145 votes.

By the time of his 1996 election to the state Supreme Court, the couple had split. But he would tell her later he had to pay the Democrats even more for that race.

With his expenses mounting, Mason eventually dipped into the client escrow account - a no-no that was exposed by his ex-wife.

The alleged wrongdoing - much of it also detailed in her unpublished memoir, "The Judge's Wife and the Political Mafia" - are unlikely to result in new criminal charges because the statute of limitations has run out.

She decided to go public because the court battle over financial support for their three children has dragged on.

When she could no longer afford a lawyer, she drew up legal papers herself. She eventually won a contempt order against him, demonstrating that of all his political foes, Mason's ex-wife has been the most formidable.