



The man who blew the whistle on Jack Abramoff tells the story of how he did it

By Susan Crabtree - 01/26/10 10:10 AM ET

He was instrumental in shining the light on one of Washington's biggest scandals. He made Jack Abramoff a household name. But few know who he is.

Tom Rodgers preferred to operate strategically behind the scenes as he played a leading role in taking down the most notorious lobbyist on K Street. But now, in an interview with The Hill, he has decided to go public with his story.



"We watched this all unfold and we remained quiet," he said. "At that time, we were stereotyped as ignorant and greedy Indians. But we knew different ... we knew the time to tell this story wasn't then."

For years, speculation about the Abramoff whistleblower has focused on the supposed revenge of a former fiancée of Michael Scanlon, Abramoff's right-hand man. Others suspected Republican lobbyists jealous of the enormous fees Abramoff collected from Indian tribes.

But some of the very tribes Abramoff deceived and defrauded turned on him and worked to destroy him — with the help of Rodgers, a trusted fellow Native American familiar with the ways of Washington.

For nearly eight years Rodgers has remained cloaked in anonymity as the Justice Department pursued its case. He watched and quietly celebrated with the tribal leaders who helped provide the inside information as the impact of the scandal spiraled.

It landed Abramoff and former Rep. Bob Ney (R-Ohio) in prison, helped force then-Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Texas) from office and played a key role in Democrats taking back the majority in the House and Senate in 2006. In the aftermath, Congress passed the most sweeping new ethics rules since Watergate.

Now Rodgers is speaking out. With only a handful of remaining Abramoff associates facing trial or sentencing, Rodgers's role was featured in a new documentary, "Casino Jack and the United States of Money," which premiered at Sundance last Saturday. The film will be shown in Washington, D.C. later this year.

In early January 2003 Rodgers was up past midnight, watching a recap of his beloved Pittsburgh Steelers playoff win when he got a fateful call that both startled and intrigued him.

"Tom, I was told I could trust you," the voice on the phone said.

Rodgers listened intently as Bernie Sprague, the subchief of the Saginaw Chippewa of Mount Pleasant, Mich., told him about his tribe's disturbing interactions with Abramoff.

"Tom, we're being threatened by our lobbyist," Rodgers was told.

Rodgers responded, "What do you mean, threatened?"

Sprague informed Rodgers that Abramoff was going to sue him because he was questioning the invoices and what he was doing to justify the millions of dollars in fees.

Sprague needed to know if Rodgers could help him.

Rodgers, a former Democratic staffer, faced a difficult choice of whether to meddle in the business of one of the most powerful Republican lobbyists. Abramoff had many friends in the GOP-controlled administration and Congress. Detractors kept their mouths shut or risked paying a heavy political and sometimes personal price.



Now 49, Rodgers is not your typical pinstriped, backslapping denizen of K Street with good Italian shoes.

He didn't hang out in Abramoff's elite GOP power circles, so the two never met even though they both represented tribal clients.

Abramoff, however, was familiar with Rodgers's reputation for operating above board. In an e-mail to Scanlon that came out during the investigation, he even called Rodgers a "moron" for doing so.

At the time, Rodgers didn't know about Abramoff's interest in him. Now he finds it amusing.

Rodgers wanted to help out the tribal leaders who contacted him but was well-aware of the danger in doing so. He gathered a small group of his trusted friends together, all of whom worked on Capitol Hill, and told them what he was about to do.

One cautioned him to be extremely careful and another explicitly warned him not to get involved.

“He said, ‘Tommy, are you prepared to lose everything you have, everything you ever accumulated?’”

But after hearing some of the details about Abramoff’s schemes, threats and deception, Rodgers couldn’t turn away.

To him, the abuse evoked a dark period in the 1850s when unscrupulous Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) agents stationed on reservations to provide tribes with food and healthcare stirred hostilities.

“We wanted to do something that would better our democracy and help Native Americans,” Rodgers stated. “We were facing people who were not Yankee bluecoats but arrived in double-breasted, custom suits.”

With the warnings in mind, Rodgers told only his friends and his family about what he planned to do and decided to hire a respected lawyer. Houston attorney Philip Hilder had represented Sharon Watkins, the whistleblower in the Enron case. Hilder cautioned Rodgers to lay low — or face the consequences.

“I judged him to be quite credible, but I also know the realities of Washington — that if he would have reared his head, it would have been decapitated,” Hilder says.

By the time Sprague contacted him, Rodgers was already tracking Abramoff’s colorful exploits through a running newspaper clip file that expanded in unpredictable ways.

Rodgers monitored Abramoff’s work for Angolan rebel leader Jonas Savimbi and the South African apartheid government, his foray into Hollywood with an anti-communist film, “Red Scorpion,” and his purchase of a fleet of casino boats in Florida and the subsequent gangland Mafia murder of its former owner. (Abramoff was convicted in 2006 for fraud and conspiracy in the purchase of the SunCruz fleet.)

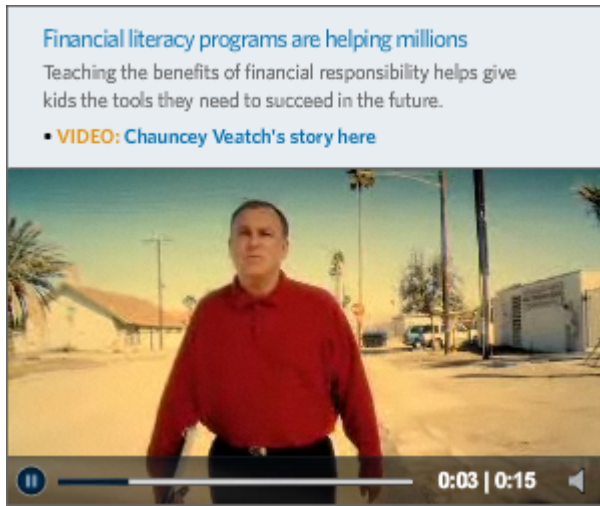
“My grandfather, who was also French Indian, had a great saying ... there’s too much s—t in that barn for there not to be a horse in there,” he said.

Rodgers’s early suspicions about Abramoff compounded after talking to Sprague and others, and his initial anger quickly turned to rage.

In the fall of 2002, Rodgers got a call from Monica Quigley, a longtime friend and former attorney for the Saginaw Chippewa tribe.

She told Rodgers she had been fired from that position after questioning Abramoff’s invoices and legislative activities. She then put Sprague in touch with Rodgers.

The Saginaw Chippewa had been sending \$2 million checks to Scanlon’s public-relations group, Capitol Campaign Strategies, at 611 Pennsylvania Ave. SE, Suite 375.



When Sprague told him Capitol Campaign Strategies' address, Rodgers was immediately suspicious.

"I said there's nothing up there but gas stations, bars and nail salons," Rodgers recalled telling Sprague.

He drove to the address to take a photo of the place to send to Sprague. What he found was a Mailboxes Etc.

"Suite 375 was seven inches high and 11 inches deep," he said.

In the months and years that followed these exchanges, Rodgers worked with members of the Saginaw Chippewa tribe, the Alabama Coushatta and their cousins the Coushatta tribe of Louisiana to gather internal invoices and documents and slowly and strategically leak them to the media after first contacting the BIA.

"We were told [by the BIA] that it was an internal affair," Rodgers recalled. "I turned to [Vice Chairman of the Louisiana Coushatta tribe David Sickey and Sprague] on a conference call one night and said, 'Now we need to go another way. We've accumulated the data; we have all the information we need. We need to leak it.' "

Aware that the national media tended to give scant attention to Native American issues, Rodgers first advised Sprague and Sickey to contact their local press, the Mt. Pleasant Morning News, the Lake Charles American Press and the Alexandria Town Talk.

After these initial local articles appeared, Rodgers said he sent 14 manila folders with a one-inch packet of the articles, invoices and other documents to several good-government groups, as well as the National Journal and The Washington Post's Susan Schmidt, who would go on to win a Pulitzer Prize for her series on the Abramoff scandal.

He chose to contact Schmidt specifically because of a 1997 article she wrote about Democratic lobbyists overcharging Native American clients.

His ability to keep his identity secret for so many years is a testament to the insular world of Native Americans; Rodgers isn't afraid to stand out in a crowd.

Usually clad in an all-black matching shirt and sport coat, his unusual combination of high cheekbones and deep-set green eyes illustrates his mixed Blackfoot Indian and Irish heritage.

His firm's website is a virtual bulletin board for favorite inspirational quotes and poetry from leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Thomas Paine.

He sprinkles his conversation with some of these lofty, idealistic quotes, but can lighten the mood with a joke, accompanied with his high-pitched laugh.

Following years of silence, Rodgers seems relieved to finally be getting the experience off his chest. During an hourlong interview, he often talked for 15 minutes straight without prompting and at one point teared up when talking about how he grew up in the small town of Glasgow, Mont., spending summers on the Blackfoot reservation.

“My parents barely finished high school, but they instilled in us an incredible work ethic and a concern for others,” he said. “We all went to graduate school and we truly escaped — and I use that word purposefully, escaped — the poverty of the Blackfoot reservation.”



Rodgers received his J.D. and master's in taxation law at the University of Denver School of Law and then moved to Washington, working as a congressional staffer for Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.) before starting a lobbying firm of his own and taking on such clients as the Alabama Coushatta of Texas and the Tule River Tribe of California.

He recalls a rocky relationship with his father, who died from cancer two months ago. The two didn't speak for 10 years after his father asked him to sign a document that contained a lie. Rodgers refused; his father complained that he cared too much about his reputation.

Rodgers says the altercation only made him more concerned about his reputation and even motivated him to take a stand when confronted by Abramoff's abuses.

“The Cree words are my father's unintended life lesson to me,” Rodgers wrote in an e-mail. “O-tee-paym-soo-wuk: a person who owns himself.”

Rodgers is well-aware that critics will accuse him of taking Abramoff down in order to steal his clients or benefit Democrats, but he says his reasons are far more complex and deeply personal. He was simply outraged over the abuse of Native Americans whose heritage he shares.

He insists that he would have spoken up if all the players were Democrats, and he never received a cent from the Louisiana Coushatta or the Saginaw Chippewa for his work — and has not taken them on as clients since.

“We did it when it mattered and we didn’t do it for money or for fame, and the records bear that out,” he said.

“I did offer [to pay him] on separate occasions, and he has just said that he wants the best for the Coushattas and always makes the point that it’s a labor of love,” Sickey said.

Shortly after the first Post stories appeared, Philip Hilder contacted the Justice Department’s public integrity unit and provided the same packet of material Rodgers had sent to media outlets.

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), then the chairman of the Indian Affairs Committee, quickly announced wide-ranging hearings to investigate Abramoff’s activities.

Rodgers called up Pablo Carillo, the lead staffer on the committee’s investigation.

“How can I help you?” Rodgers remembers Carillo saying as he picked up the phone that day.

“Actually, I believe I can help you,” Rodgers responded, telling him about the invoices and documents he had amassed.

“How soon can you be here?” Rodgers said Carillo responded.



During his initial work and the years that followed, Rodgers was silently amused by the mistaken attempts to unmask the Deep Throat of the Abramoff scandal.

“What’s important is that the tribes that were defrauded and cheated and abused did something about it, and we did it when it mattered,” he said.

He faults some Washington players who later write books about misdeeds they knew were going on at the time: “Well, then why didn’t you do something then?”

The tribal leaders say they couldn’t have drawn blood without Rodgers’s quiet but lethal under-the-radar strategy.

“We sustained our course and moved on it consistently, and that had a lot to do with Rodgers being the quarterback,” Sickey said.

“If Tom hadn’t been willing to help, I truthfully don’t think anything would have come of it,” Quigley added.

Emily Miller, Scanlon’s former fiancée, who for years was mistakenly blamed for being the original whistleblower, said she suspected that the real source was another lobbyist.

“I’m surprised but thrilled to know that the moral outrage of a fellow Native American was Abramoff’s real downfall,” she said. “Good for him.”

Rodgers decided it is the right time to reveal his role because the Abramoff scandal appears to be coming to a close. Abramoff has served nearly four years, with two more to go.

He hopes the scandal will have a lasting impact but admits he has real concerns that something similar could happen again if Washington doesn’t enforce the ethics laws it spawned.

“One of my favorite lines is from the movie ‘Wall Street,’ ” Rodgers recalls, “when Hal Holbrook walks up to Charlie Sheen and says, ‘Bud, money makes you do things you don’t want to do.’ ”

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