

Appeals court race explodes in angry dispute between major GOP donors and former Gov. Scott Walker's family

Daniel Bice, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

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Former Gov. **Scott Walker** is out of office. But Walker is front and center in a race for the state appellate court bench. And it's personal.

On the one side, the challenger — Muskego Municipal Judge **Shelley Grogan** — has been endorsed by Walker and his wife, Tonette. Their son Alex is running Grogan's campaign.

"Judge Grogan faces a tough battle against an (Gov. **Tony**) **Evers**-appointee who had to pack up and move to the Second District to even take the oath of office," Tonette Walker said in a fundraising letter earlier this month. District II covers the Milwaukee suburbs.

She went on to say that Grogan's opponent is backed by "Madison liberals" who favor a "far-left agenda."

That did not sit well with the family of the incumbent, Appeals Court Judge **Jeff Davis**. Davis' father is **Don H. Davis Jr.**, the former CEO of **Rockwell Automation** and a major supporter of the Republican Party over the years.

How major? The family has given more than \$250,000 to federal and state Republican groups and candidates over the years, including \$25,500 to Walker.

The judge's mother, **Sallie**, responded to the Walkers in a fiery letter obtained by the **Journal Sentinel**.

"Don and I recently received a Christmas card from you and Scott. I would ordinarily be writing to thank you for that," she wrote last week. "Unfortunately, I instead find myself writing to express my disappointment — no, I would say disgust — with the dishonest fundraising piece you recently sent on behalf of Shelley Grogan."

Walker better not hit up the Davis family for any future donations. The note got even more hostile.

"I realize that courtesy and common decency have little place among some in politics, and I can clearly see now that my family can count you and Scott among those in politics for whom those words mean essentially nothing," Sallie Davis continued. "But even a lack of those qualities does not excuse the half-truths and outright lies in these letters."

A judicial race's competing narratives

Tough words — and the sniping between the two sides hasn't stopped.

At the heart of the dispute are the competing narratives from the two campaigns. The election is on April 6.

Grogan's campaign wants to portray the race as a simple case of right versus left. Her team said as much in response to Sallie Davis' letter.

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"This reinforces that in this race, Walker and Republicans are supporting constitutional conservative Judge Shelley Grogan over her opponent who was appointed by liberal Governor Tony Evers," wrote Alex Walker.

It's true that Grogan has the support of her boss, conservative Supreme Court Justice **Rebecca Bradley**, for whom she is a law clerk, and former Justice **Dan Kelly**.

But Grogan doesn't mention that she applied to Evers, a Democrat, to try to get the same appointment that went to Davis.

Walker also took a pass on appointing Grogan to a Waukesha County Circuit judge's post in 2018, a position he gave to former Attorney General **Brad Schimel**.

As for Davis, his parents have been solid Republicans for a long time. His father has given \$188,450 just to the Republican National Committee in the past two decades.

Among the GOP beneficiaries of the Davis largess have been President **George W. Bush**, former U.S. Sen. **John McCain**, former Wisconsin Gov. **Tommy Thompson**, former House Speaker **Paul Ryan**, U.S. Sen. **Ron Johnson** and U.S. Rep. **Mike Gallagher**.

Davis also has the support of two conservative Supreme Court justices — **Annette Ziegler** and **Patience Roggensack** — and two former conservative justices, **David Prosser** and **Jon Wilcox**.

But it's also true that Davis has given small donations to several liberals, including former Gov. **Jim Doyle**. He also had to move into the district to take the appointment from Evers, while Grogan has lived in the district for more than 25 years.

Rather than framing it as a partisan contest, Davis' campaign has tried to make the case that the election is between a highly qualified incumbent and an inexperienced challenger.

Davis was a former longtime partner at the **Quarles & Brady** law firm, building a lengthy résumé of cases, writings and clients. Grogan has spent most of her career as a law clerk, usually considered an introductory position for attorneys.

Here is Davis' campaign manager, **Vi Hammelman**, responding to the statement from the Grogan campaign.

"Sadly, what this (statement) actually 'reinforces' is that the Grogan campaign is based on political partisanship rather than the qualifications, experience and integrity we need in our judicial branch," Hammelman wrote.

In her letter to Tonette Walker, Sallie Davis ended by asking for the names of those who received the former first lady's fundraising appeal earlier this month.

Sallie Davis said she wanted to send them accurate information about her son to counter Tonette's letter and one by Kelly, the former Supreme Court justice. Not like the Grogan campaign would ever do that.

"These communications, of course, are particularly shocking to us as longtime donors to Republican causes," Sallie Davis wrote. She said her family has given "over \$25,000 to your husband's campaigns (most recently \$10,000 in his campaign against Governor Evers) and tens of thousands of dollars to the Republican Party, which is now openly supporting and helping to fund Jeff's opponent's campaign with smear tactics."

Yep, Walker may be gone, but he — and his family — are certainly not forgotten.

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