

THE UNELECTED: Phil Giarrizzo



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THE UNELECTED: Profiles of political operatives impacting Nevada.

Meet Phil Giarrizzo, Jersey tough-guy goes to the mattresses and helps bring down Nevada Sen. Sandra Tiffany.

By Dan Geary

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In the heart of Sacramento's bustling mid-town, Phil Giarrizzo strides down the hall of his enormous operations hub. His offices are located appropriately in a renovated, turn-of-the-20th-century firehouse. Giarrizzo knows how to put out fires.

He excels at starting them as well.

He and his staff, all veterans of California's glory-or-death political culture, go about their day in a war-fighting center designed to hold dozens of people at peak periods: phone banks, work stations, alcoves and couches to huddle on projects - all eerily quiet in the post-election holiday season. The central area of the office is ringed with stacks of direct mail pieces, all the products of Giarrizzo's work in 2006.

Roughly one in six of each pile are samples of mail pieces that were part of ending Nevada State Senator Sandra Tiffany's colorful and controversial career. Recruited by the Nevada State Education Association and Nevada political operative Dan Hart, Giarrizzo created, produced and oversaw the targeted direct-mail campaign component of the NSEA's independent expenditure against Tiffany. He thumbs through the mail pieces, picking them up with a smile and a low chuckle. "Check this one out," he says, "this one's a killer." It takes one to know one.

Born and raised in the rough and tumble of New York and New Jersey, Phil Giarrizzo's outward persona reflects the Jersey caricature of a young man whose politics evolved during the late 60's and early 70's. His personal office is covered in photos of labor marches and news articles featuring photos of a young, fiery Giarrizzo stoking the crowd. One article in particular catches my eye. A Christmas season labor protest supporting janitors with Giarrizzo dressed like a shopping-mall Santa. In the grainy image, he's being handcuffed and taken away by the San Jose California police. The headline: Santa Gets Pinched.



When his son arrives in the office after school, his demeanor softens as he wraps his arm around him and gives a proud introduction. It is patently obvious that he is fiercely devoted to his family. Along with his tough-guy character is a deep respect for the labor movement and its role. He instills this in his staff and he clearly runs his firm in a way that reflects his own personality - anything worth doing should be done with intensity.

Unlike most political operatives, who engage in conversation while constantly checking the inevitable Blackberry; Giarrizzo devotes his entire attention to the person in front of him and listens with an attentiveness that is a little unnerving. Long before he entered politics, Phil Giarrizzo was a skilled union leader. He was CEO of a 40,000 member public-sector employee union in Los Angeles with a staff of over one hundred. He taught Collective Bargaining at San Jose City College and served on the Service Employees International Union Executive Board. Avoiding the limelight, Giarrizzo has numerous "Pollie Awards" given by the American Association of Political Consultants recognizing his skill in crafting direct mail, radio, newspaper and issue advocacy campaigns.

In 2004, he produced direct mail for Democratic Presidential candidate Wesley Clark. When John Kerry's campaign underwent a shake-up, political powerhouse Michael Whouley headed to the DNC to oversee the Kerry-Edwards operations. He tabbed Giarrizzo, who worked with him in Iowa for Vice President Gore's presidential bid, to be the DNC's gatekeeper on all direct mail produced by consultants and state parties nationwide on behalf of the Kerry-Edwards campaign. "I needed someone with focus, who could read mail, has good instincts, could read polls and who could keep his head about him in a tough campaign," Whouley said in a Sacramento Bee article regarding Giarrizzo's appointment.

For a single congressional campaign, he showed me the targeting report produced for that race - a document as large as a mid-size city's telephone book, with plans targeting at a micro-level geographically and in an enormously detailed number of profiles; matching marketing behavior, voting patterns and other metrics such as "Vietnamese Surname" to name one of dozens of references and cross-references.

In 2005, Giarrizzo directed the statewide field campaign for the Alliance for a Better California's No on Prop.'s 74 thru 77 Campaigns. It was one of the largest organizing efforts in the state - 15,000 volunteers, 45 offices and 200 professional staff. They swept all four ballot questions in what was described as the largest Get-Out-The-Vote operation in California history.

2006 marked Giarrizzo's major-league entrance into Nevada's political sphere. He oversaw direct mail for State Sen. Dina Titus' primary election campaign against Henderson Mayor Jim Gibson. He was then brought in by Dan Hart and his key staff member, Chad Wilkins, to work with them on direct mail for a variety of races including County Commissioner Rory Reid, and the Nevada State Education Association's independent campaign to unseat State Sen. Sandra Tiffany.

Tiffany's combative instincts, which proved problematic in the hyper-polite legislative community, had previously served her well on the campaign trail. Time and again, she was challenged and survived. Many regarded the conservative Republican as unbeatable in her suburban southern district.

Enter the NSEA, Dan Hart and Phil Giarrizzo. The volume of mail (the primary instrument for voter persuasion in a Nevada legislative race) produced and sent was staggering by Nevada legislative standards. The level of detail and planning has been largely unheard of here, though Giarrizzo questions those who do not use the latest micro-targeting data available for the state. The result may have forged a new lethal team on the Democratic side whose objective is to win the unwinnable race.

For now, Phil Giarrizzo is content with the slower pace afforded him during the holiday season. He shows off his new Harley and it's clear that he pursues his hobbies with the intensity he displays in his personal and professional relationships. It's clear that he is getting restless though. Giarrizzo is a political warrior - and warriors do not do well during peacetime.

For him, the storm clouds are already gathering for the 2008 campaign. He can hardly wait. He says he loves the "wild west politics" of Nevada and is keeping a bag packed hoping for another call asking him to head back here for another round of political combat.