

J.J. Rizzo: Saga of a Party Prince

by Jon Schuessler

The year was 2010. Missouri's 40th legislative district, located in Kansas City along Jackson County's northern border, was holding its last Democratic primary before being re-drawn as the 19th district. It seemed like business as usual for the party machine, who had nominated John Joseph Rizzo, son of political party boss Henry Rizzo, to be the Democratic candidate for state representative.

Since there was no Republican challenger, "J.J." Rizzo would be a lock to win a seat in the Missouri legislature. All he needed was a rubber-stamp vote in the primary as the only name on the ballot.

Then something strange happened. A retired Navy pilot by the name of Will Royster decided to run in the primary. Royster, too, had wealth and a family with a political history, but unlike Rizzo, he had few established connections in the local Democratic party. What he did have was a long history of working with the people in his community.

Despite his no-name status, Royster immediately proved a pugnacious challenger. People were listening, people who were hoping for a change in the slow decline of north Kansas City. The old-guard supporters of the Rizzo family responded by funding negative ads, and Royster responded with his own. The campaign became vicious, with no clear winner in the polls.

When the votes were counted, it was nearly a tie. J.J. Rizzo: 664 votes. Will Royster: 663 votes.

Rizzo had won by one vote.

Or had he? Royster's camp immediately called for a recount, and soon found many possible discrepancies. Fourteen ballots lacked the required initials from an election judge to be official. Witnesses testified that numerous Somali immigrants were led to the polls by interpreters – none of whom had an affidavit beforehand to do so, as required by law – and told how to vote. Another witness testified that a poll judge and a worker falsified time sheets to hide a two-hour absence. In the Choteau Court precinct, the polling place was moved to a church 1.3 miles away, three precincts distant and outside of the entire 40th House

district (which is against Missouri law). None of the 180 registered voters who lived in the Choteau Court precinct found the church, or were able to vote.

Royster's evidence was presented to Jackson County Judge W. Stephen Nixon. Judge Nixon, unmoved, ruled in favor of J.J. Rizzo. Soon after, as it turns out, Nixon would land a comfortable job and a pay raise as the Jackson County counselor, thanks to the approval of the chairman of the Jackson County legislature – who happened to be none other than J.J.'s father, Henry Rizzo.

Royster was not done, however. He took his case to the Missouri court of appeals, while calling upon the state Attorney General and the Secretary of State to investigate. Neither responded favorably, and the appellate court again ruled against holding a new election.

J.J. Rizzo would be the official House representative for the 40th district.

Although the election and its aftermath briefly made national news, it was soon forgotten. Republicans tried to use the story as support for Voter ID laws, and Democrats responded by denying that any fraud ever took place. The truth, as often happens in party politics, became less important than scoring points in a national debate.

Yet the story doesn't end here. On June 28th, 2013, J.J.'s aunt and uncle, John and Clara Moretina, pleaded guilty in a Jackson County court to voter fraud. It turns out that they had lied about their residence in the 40th district in order to vote in the election. Assuming that they had voted for their nephew, their votes had made the difference in the 2010 primary. J.J. Rizzo had now officially won his seat from voter fraud.

J.J. remains largely silent about the issue. "I've been re-elected since then," he told a Kansas City newspaper. Of course, his "re-election" was unopposed in both the primary and general elections. The same goes for his "re-election" in 2014.

For their crime, the Moretinas were fined \$250 and barred for life from voting. Prosecutor Jean Peters Baker said, "Justice was done." Yet justice seems further than ever for the residents of northeast Kansas City, where the gap

between gated communities and transient neighborhoods continues to widen, and who remain represented by a political noble whose affability has earned him the position of Democratic minority whip in the House.

Perhaps Royster would have been unequal to the task of shaking up the business-as-usual culture in Jefferson City. Perhaps Royster might have proved himself another politician who peddled a dream, only to betray that vision once he was elected. Perhaps Royster would not have been the champion that the residents of the 40th district needed.

Thanks to a party dynasty, we will never know.