

'God's Sugar Daddy'

by *Bill Berkowitz*

School voucher proponent James Leininger has spent millions trying to buy political power in Texas

While the philanthropic community has been abuzz about the world's second wealthiest man, billionaire investor Warren Buffett's giving a large part of his \$44 billion fortune to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), Texas James Leininger, a much lesser-known billionaire has allocated a large chunk of his fortune to seeing to it that the religious right maintains its dominance over the Texas political landscape.

Buffet's gift to the BMGF, according to Business Week, "could ultimately double the size of the foundation, to \$60 billion, creating a mega-philanthropy the likes of which the world has never seen." The money, the magazine pointed out, will allow the foundation to "hand out a staggering \$3 billion a year in grants ... [and] create unprecedented resources ... [to be] use[d] to address such vexing problems as AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria in developing nations, and the high school dropout rate in the U.S."

Meanwhile, back in Texas, the relatively unknown Leininger, a San Antonio-based physician and businessman who made a fortune largely by selling specialty hospital beds, and who has been a major contributor to conservative causes and candidates for years, is becoming much more visible due to his quest to spread school vouchers throughout the state.

According to the Texas Freedom Network, Leininger initiated an "unprecedented effort" to "buy a Legislature that will turn his obsession -- a reckless private school voucher plan -- into law."

The Spring 2006 issue of TFN's Network News reported that "by the March 7 primary elections, Dr. Leininger had given nearly \$2.8 million to pro-voucher candidates and political action committees."

Network News also noted that Leininger had donated more than \$1.8 million to a PAC "cofunding far-right challengers to just five GOP House incumbents ... [who] had dared to vote against a voucher scheme last May."

For more than a decade, the Austin, Texas-based Texas Freedom Network, "a nonpartisan, grassroots organization of more than 23,000 religious and community leaders," has been a "watchdog, monitoring far-right issues, organizations, money and leaders."

While Leininger's most recent donations yielded mixed results in the March elections -- two pro-voucher candidates won seats on the State Board of Education -- for more than a decade, he has been unrelenting in his support for right wing candidates and causes. Over that time he has "poured millions" into state politics,

spending nearly \$10 million since 1997 alone.

In a report titled "Meet â€ˆGod's Sugar Daddy," columnist Molly Ivins pointed out that Leininger "is known as the Daddy Warbucks of Texas social conservatism -- or, as the San Antonio Current ... called him, â€ˆGod's Sugar Daddy."

Reporter Debbie Nathan described Leininger's extensive conservative agenda in a piece for the Austin Chronicle:

Few know that his anti-abortion and Christian-school-board campaign giving is only the tip of an iceberg of one-man benevolence -- much of it sunk into right-wing projects that have changed the political landscape in Texas, and to some extent, the nation...Hardly anyone is aware of the role he has played in making the Texas Supreme Court one of the most anti-consumer, pro-business judicial bodies in the nation; or about his instrumental and sometimes smear-tactic efforts to pack the State Board of Education with Christian conservatives; or how he has been associated with a group implicated in federal campaign finance scandals; or of his support for attempts to gut the Endangered Species Act; or the way he funds anti-choice groups.

Leininger, a native of Indiana, is more than just the hospital-bed guy: He has extensive business holdings that, according to the Center for Media and Democracy's SourceWatch, includes:

Â· The Beginner's Bible; "holds the trademark license" and to "its supplemental coloring books for children."

Â· Focus Direct; Owner of "a direct mail company hired by conservative Republican candidates statewide -- often with money Leininger has donated to them"; "Clients include Delta Airlines, Ralston-Purina, the Texas Republican Party, Oregon Public Radio, and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC)/Klan Watch, an Alabama-based nonprofit that monitors far-right, potentially violent groups."

Â· Home Court America; Part owner of a "San Antonio basketball and gymnasium facility located in the northwest suburbs."

Â· Kinetic Concepts International; Third owner of a "medical bed and supply company."

Â· Mission City Food Co.; Co-owner of the "parent company of Promised Land Dairy and other food-processing groups such as Sunday House smoked turkey."

Â· Mission City Properties; Owner of "a San Antonio-based commercial real estate company." Leininger "houses many of his political action committees and other groups in these properties."

Â· Mission City Television; "San Antonio company produces videotapes for commercials and other TV formats."

Â· The San Antonio Spurs; "Leininger holds an estimated 10 percent interest in the San Antonio [professional] basketball team."

Â· Sunday House; Co-owner of a "Fredericksburg company that makes and markets smoked turkeys."

Â· TXN; Leininger started and/or financed "the failed 'The News of Texas', a 24-hour Texas news cable network."

Â· Winning Strategies; Has controlling interest; "a political consulting company with a client list that includes the Christian Coalition."

According to Debbie Nathan, Leininger is a member of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), which split from other Presbyterians over civil rights and feminism. He worships at Faith Presbyterian Church, where the pastor is Tim Hoke.

GOP takes Texas; religious right takes the GOP

Over the past two decades, the Republican Party has become the state's majority party. And at the same time, the party has come under the domination of the religious right.

Earlier this year, the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund published "The Anatomy of Power: Texas and the Religious Right in 2006," a report that "explore[d] the growing power of far-right religious extremists in

the state's electoral politics."

According to the report:

Texas politicians, it appears are particularly willing to appeal overtly for the support of religious conservatives. This willingness has grown as the religious right has moved in little more than a decade from the fringes of the political realm to the halls of Texas politics and government.

The TFN report found that:

• The religious right has tightened its grip on the Republican Party of Texas and now completely controls the party leadership. In fact, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish between the movement and the party in leadership, political goals and tactics.

• Having spent \$10 million since 1997 to help the Texas GOP take control of state government...James Leininger is now working to purge from office those Republicans who fail to support fully the religious right's public policy agenda. In fact, with Leininger's financial support, the religious right is on the verge of finally winning a majority of seats on the State Board of Education.

• The new model in the religious right's political strategy relies on recruiting conservative evangelical pastors who will use their positions as church leaders to advance the movement's policy agenda. In fact, the state's newest far-right pressure group, the Texas Restoration Project, has been recruiting thousands of pastors to support (successfully) a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage and to back conservative candidates for office, including Gov. Rick Perry.

• David Barton, vice chair of the state GOP and president of the Christian advocacy group WallBuilders, has become a key part of efforts to recruit conservative evangelicals into the Republican Party. Using questionable research, Barton appeals to Christian conservatives with the dubious argument that the separation of church and state is a myth created by activist judges.

The TFN report, which devotes an entire section to Leininger, pointed out that he has been a major player in the GOP's sharp turn to the right in the state. Although he's made a fortune with his vast business investments, Leininger's "most significant investments have been in the careers of politicians who back his public policy agenda, including tort reform, private school vouchers, pushing religious conservative principles in public schools, and opposition to abortion and gay rights."

What sets Leininger apart from other big-time donors to right wing causes in Texas such as Houston homebuilder Bob Perry and East Texas chicken tycoon Bo Pilgrim, is his laser-like "ideological focus." It's also clear that Leininger is in it for the long run. In 1989, he founded the Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF - website) a conservative "think tank" that "produces policy papers on a variety of pet conservative causes." TPPF was a prominent player in the state's "textbook wars," a classic culture wars battle that supported "social conservatives seeking to censor public school textbooks because of perceived anti-American, anti-free enterprise and anti-Christian bias."

As the Texas Freedom Network report documents, Leininger has developed a "vast web of interlocking and overlapping pressure groups" and political action committees to promote his agenda. At this point, his main interest is "building his influence in elections to statewide offices and the Texas Legislature."

"Generous campaign contributions from the Leininger camp helped Republicans sweep all statewide races in 1998 and 2002. During the 2002 election cycle, the Leiningers "gave nearly \$1.5 million to Republican candidates for the House and Senate, conservative political action committees, the state Republican Party and a national Republican committee that funds state election races."

Most recently, Leininger's efforts have gone into "purging from office moderate Republicans" who have not been reliable enough for Leininger. He gave more than \$2 million to two new political action committees -- the Texas Republican Legislative Campaign Committee and the Future of Texas Alliance -- to unseat Republicans opposed to his school vouchers initiatives. While he didn't fully succeed this time, one of Leininger's ultimate goals is gaining absolute control of the State Board of Education.

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