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Knee-Deep

IN THE HOOPLA

By Jim Stewart

When the post-election furor hit Florida, Todd Elmer found himself on the front lines.

As he and his fellow passengers sat on the airport tarmac in Tallahassee, Fla., waiting to leave their plane, Todd Elmer glanced over to see a small private jet pull in and park beside them.

The door of the jet opened and out stepped Jeb Bush, governor of Florida and brother of Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush. The governor took a long look at Elmer's plane, then turned and pointed to his companions with, as Elmer describes it, "a strange look of annoyed exasperation on his face."

The date was November 8, 2000, and Round 2 of the fight for the presidency of the United States was about to begin. When Bush eyed the "Gore Lieberman 2000" plane that morning, and the plane's passengers returned his gaze, you had, in Elmer's words, "two opposing camps, quietly staring each other down in the morning sun as the battle was about to begin."

The rest of the country would spend the next five weeks waiting and watching with a mix of wonder, confusion and frustration. But Elmer, a Washington, D.C., attorney whose Capitol Hill contacts and political experience helped him earn an appointment to be Al Gore's national director for business outreach during the campaign, was tapped to work in the recount trenches. He and his colleagues from the plane traveled throughout Florida, challenging election boards, cajoling local officials and striving, in his words, to ensure that the "will of the people" was carried out.

From Elmer's perspective, the will of the people meant that Gore should be president. "We knew we had more votes than Bush in Florida," he says. So when,

after five weeks of legal wrangling and political maneuvering, the United States Supreme Court issued its final ruling and Gore conceded Florida — and the election — to Bush, he was understandably deflated.

"It was pretty devastating," says Elmer, a 1993 Furman graduate. "I felt like our entire system had failed. After all that we had been through, involving every branch of the government and the best minds, everything came down to a political decision. And justice was still thwarted by a court's 5-4 political fiat."

Well, you've got to remember that his guy lost.

Today, given time for reflection, Elmer recalls his experiences as "stressful and fascinating, a real roller-coaster ride. Some days I was really pumped with the justness of our cause. After all, we'd won the popular vote. Other days I was really discouraged by court rulings or because of the propaganda and tactics of the Republicans."

But the long hours and hard-fought nature of the struggle weren't completely unexpected. The world was watching while the presidency was decided in one state, and both sides were arguing over each individual vote. Plus, says Elmer, "We were fighting two battles — the vote count battle and the battle for public opinion."

Which wasn't always on his side. Elmer was asked to lead the Democratic forces in Manatee County, where 131 overseas ballots were up for scrutiny — and he would be pitted against a Republican canvassing board and a Republican supervisor of elections.

Elmer was told he was right for the job because of his legal knowledge and



ALEX DIAZ, BRADENTON HERALD

Todd Elmer gives a ballot the once-over during the contentious Manatee County hearing.

his ability to balance diplomacy with persistence. So after completing his recount work in Osceola and Volusia counties, he moved on to Manatee to convince the board of the justness of his cause.

Easier said than done. "We were dealing with local election officials who don't usually get a lot of attention," he says. "Suddenly they were being put under a microscope and getting more scrutiny than they had ever encountered. That's a lot of stress and naturally makes people defensive, because their job performance is on the line. The Republicans were doing the same things we were, so the election officials were doubly on edge."

Elmer says he tried to be as nonconfrontational as possible and to explain that he simply wanted what everyone else wanted — a fair count. But this was politics, and the stakes couldn't be higher.

When the time came to review the Manatee ballots, Elmer walked into a room



As national director for business outreach in the Gore campaign, Elmer coordinated efforts to garner public endorsements from business leaders in each state and to blunt claims that the Gore platform was anti-business.

filled with television cameras, a judge, a crowd of curious observers, and “self-righteous Republican lawyers in bad suits.” Elmer’s job was to make sure that the board “follow the letter of the law and review each and every ballot to determine if it met all the legal requirements for admission in Florida — and reject it if it did not.” If this meant that they’d all have to miss that night’s high school football game, so be it.

Elmer’s insistence on determining the legal validity of each ballot was met with a certain amount of hostility. This was, after all, a Republican board in a Republican-dominated area, and many of the ballots were expected to be Republican votes.

For four hours, he says, he weathered derisive comments from board members, opposition lawyers and the audience. One observer even advised him to check his tires on the way out to make sure they hadn’t been slashed.

But once the valid ballots were determined and the board began solemnly and officially recording each vote, Elmer says he “tried to remember that this was why we were here and take in the whole process.”

After the hearing, Elmer sat down and described his experiences to a few friends in a lengthy, somewhat irreverent e-mail filled with insight on the process and a few pointed, though harmless, potshots at Republicans. Then he headed to Orange County to assist with recount efforts there.

But he didn’t anticipate that his friends would forward the note to their friends. Or that they would forward it along to their friends, on and on, until . . .

A few days later, he received a call from the Associated Press. Someone had forwarded his e-mail to a reporter, who planned to write an article.

After answering the reporter’s questions, Elmer grew concerned that the story might be distorted by the media frenzy surrounding the recount and become a problem for the Gore campaign. “I didn’t want to become a CNN poster boy,” he says. Gore officials advised him to “lay low” and see how the story played.

As it turned out, while the article did move on the AP wire, it was released on a day filled with hard, breaking news. To Elmer’s relief, it proved uncontroversial and was largely ignored.

Once the minor tempest had passed — perhaps the worst thing about it, he says, was “experiencing the political rite of passage of becoming media roadkill” — he returned to the battlefield for a time, then headed home to Washington. But as the struggle dragged on, he was called back to Florida, and he was in Tallahassee when the final verdict came down.

“When the Supreme Court made its final ruling, the difference was 98 ballots,” he says. “It’s almost unbelievable. It just goes to show that the old saying is true — every vote does count.”

Now back in Washington, Elmer plans to remain in politics and land a committee post or other assignment on Capitol Hill. Politics has been in his blood, he says, since his student days, when he took part in the political science department’s Washington program.

And he says his experiences taught him valuable lessons about the importance of what he calls the “nitty gritty details” of how we vote, such as the format of the ballot and the requirements for voters.

“The weaknesses and disparities of the voting system were exposed,” he says, adding that the nation needs a more uniform system of voting. “Wealthier counties used electronic scanners, but poorer areas had punch-card ballots. And the reality is that not everyone punches them all the way through. I could see the ballots, and there are such things as hanging and dimpled chads. Millions of Americans vote, but they don’t all do it right.”

Despite his disappointment with the outcome, he is also convinced that the country will be stronger as a result of the 2000 battle for the White House. Although he is only 29 years old, he sounds like a seasoned political commentator when he says, “We’ve had our system challenged and stretched to the breaking point, but we survived it all. It was a tough lesson to learn, but democracy will be stronger.”