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POWER PLAYER HAS LOTS OF PULL WORKING BEHIND THE SCENES

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JOYCE ABOUSSIE

After months of unflattering coverage of his inaugural debt, Gov. Bob Holden sought help from a powerful friend and former boss: Joyce Aboussie.

Aboussie targeted some potential donors. Holden called them.

When his latest financial reports were released this month, they showed that he'd raised more than \$260,000 since seeking Aboussie's aid.

Holden said her involvement was nothing unusual. "I'm always talking to Joyce on a whole host of things," the governor said. "I rely upon her a great deal."

Such a role -- which she won't discuss -- fits with her reputation as the most influential behind-the-scenes player in Missouri politics. She's also among the most powerful political operatives in the country. Yet, most Missourians have never heard of her.

On paper, Aboussie is the national political director to House Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt, D-St. Louis County.

In practice, she's a key strategist and fund-raiser for almost every Democrat who's won a recent election in Missouri. That includes the governor, lieutenant governor, state auditor, state treasurer, St. Louis county executive and St. Louis' new mayor.

Aboussie also figures prominently in the backroom maneuvering on almost every major issue in the state -- from this spring's congressional redistricting to the tentative agreement for a new Cardinals stadium.

Says Cardinals president Mark Lamping: "I believe Joyce Aboussie was the invisible hand behind the scenes that made that happen."

Her particular contribution, he said, was in orchestrating a key March 18 meeting of four major political players: Gephardt, Holden, St. Louis County Executive George R. "Buzz" Westfall and St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay (who was then the Democratic candidate for mayor). All four officials are close to Aboussie. At that meeting, which she attended, the four agreed to try to work out a deal to help the Cardinals.

Aboussie won't talk about that, either. She prefers to stay below the radar of the public or the press. That makes her a perfect foil for her high-profile, smooth-talking boss.

While he's called Mr. Compromise, she's often dubbed a barracuda. "We don't call her the Ayatollah Aboussie for nothing," said Westfall, who's relied on her expertise for more than a decade.

Aboussie chuckles at the comparison. "I am who I am. I don't craft myself to complement Dick Gephardt," she said. "He is Mr. Nice Guy. Sometimes I am a barracuda."

Take, for example, this spring's jockeying for new congressional boundary lines. U.S. Rep. Todd Akin's district director, Patrick Werner, recounts how Aboussie took control of the negotiations.

In their first meeting, Werner said he was stunned when Aboussie bluntly told him what territory Akin, R-Town and Country, could keep within his 2nd District and what he'd have to give up to Rep. William Lacy Clay Jr., D-St. Louis.

Werner told her, for example, that Akin wanted to retain Lambert Field. Aboussie said no. Akin wanted to keep the local offices of Boeing and Monsanto. She said they had to move into Clay's 1st District as well.

Their argument moved to the politically split state Legislature, which made the final decision. Akin submitted an alternate map. Aboussie's map prevailed -- largely because she'd privately secured the support of the state's other four Republicans in the U.S. House.

Aboussie chuckles at Werner's complaint about her strong-arm tactics. "It's a fair slam," she said. "And it happens to be accurate."

Werner, meanwhile, says there's no hard feelings. "I respect the pure politics that she practices. I learned a lot."

Indeed, Aboussie appears to be on good terms with area Republicans who repeatedly bash her boss. She attracts praise from such key GOP players as state House Minority Leader Catherine Hanaway of Warson Woods and Clayton manufacturing magnate Sam Fox, the state's most generous GOP donor.

And no Democrat wants to cross her -- particularly in public.

"I can't think of anyone who I'd least want against me," said Slay, who's known Aboussie all her life. "I can't think of anybody who I'd rather have on my side, either."

Last month, Aboussie became the first aide to receive the regional Democratic Party's Thomas Jefferson Award, a partisan honor that's previously gone to politicians.

At the dinner in her honor, Gephardt offered rare public insight into the key role she plays in his political life. Gephardt got teary-eyed as he told the banquet crowd, "She's a person who you can trust with your life."

Gephardt said he makes no apologies for her take-no-prisoners style. "I am damned glad," he explained, "that we've got somebody on our side who understands that this ain't beanbag."

Politics in her blood

Aboussie was born into a family with a long political history. Her father, Alex Aboussie, is a longtime Democratic activist in the city. A cousin, Martie Aboussie, was a longtime St. Louis alderman.

She recalls being a television-news junkie as a kindergartner, about the same time that she got involved in her first political campaign. She distributed leaflets promoting then-Sen. Thomas F. Eagleton, D-Mo., and still recalls the jingle: " 'Eagleton, he's our man, a man for all Missourians.' "

She graduated from the all-girls St. Joseph Academy, serving as class president her junior year. She started her first political consulting firm while still a student at St. Louis University.

Aboussie's first high-profile consulting job was in 1980, when she was hired to manage St. Louis' successful campaign to end its \$25,000 salary ceiling for municipal employees.

She began working for Gephardt in 1976 as a volunteer. By 1978, she was managing his campaigns. As Gephardt rose in prominence, so did Aboussie.

On the side, she started a polling and telemarketing firm, Telephone Contact Inc., that's now among the largest in the Midwest. The firm has used public records to assemble detailed information on every voter in Missouri. It's routinely hired by candidates and school districts.

Tony Feather, a Missouri native who served as national political director for now-President George W. Bush, says Aboussie's firm has helped transform her into a national player.

Aboussie, says Feather, is probably the only political aide in the country who has the latest voter-contact technology at her fingertips. "She's become the information funnel for the (Democratic) party," he said. "I don't know anyone in the Republican Party who has what she has."

But what's key, he and others add, is Aboussie's gift for strategy. Indeed, some Republicans speculate that Bush carried Missouri last fall, instead of Gore, because Aboussie was concentrating on helping Holden.

Holden used to work as a congressional aide for Gephardt and Aboussie in the early 1980s. Lt. Gov. Joe Maxwell and state Auditor Claire McCaskill also all once worked for Gephardt.

Devoted to the cause

Aboussie, 44, says her political philosophy is simple: "I think sometimes government ought to be there to get things done." She adds that she's willing to go all-out to help Democratic candidates who share that view. And as she sees it, nobody personifies that philosophy more than Gephardt.

"We're really devoted to each other," Gephardt said.

Says Aboussie of her boss: "Dick Gephardt is the closest thing to another brother that I will have."

Gephardt's campaign pays Aboussie about \$130,000 a year to run his political operations, based in a mall storefront in Shrewsbury. During last fall's contests, Vice President Al Gore and the state Democratic Party placed their campaign operations next door.

She's known for striking terror in the hearts of Gephardt's aides in Washington. When high-powered national consultants fly in, Aboussie routinely mandates that they take out the office trash and go door-to-door with Gephardt to hear from average voters.

Aboussie, who lives in south St. Louis County, is single. She's Catholic and close to her family. But she is so focused on politics that friends joke that she doesn't know the make of her leased car. (It's a Chrysler LH.)

She has one other passion: St. Jude Children's Hospital in Memphis, Tenn. Her family helped entertainer Danny Thomas start the hospital almost 40 years ago.

Actress Marlo Thomas, daughter of the late entertainer, says Aboussie has been on the hospital's board since the early 1980s and now is vice chairman. She used her own money to endow a pediatric AIDS laboratory and, Thomas says, "easily" raises more than \$1 million a year for the hospital.

"I'm crazy about her," said Thomas. "I'm from Hollywood and I know a lot of people who aren't the genuine article. She is."

Aboussie tries to stay in the background. But longtime friend Donna Brazile, who managed Gore's White House bid, said Aboussie is increasingly attracting national attention.

She calls Aboussie "one of the few women who've come through the ranks to be players on the national stage. She raises money. She raises hell. She does it with finesse."

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PROFILE: Joyce Aboussie works as political director for House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, but her influence goes beyond Missouri's 3rd Congressional District. She helped get the state's current governor, lieutenant governor, auditor and treasurer elected, as well as the St. Louis county executive and St. Louis' new mayor. GOP strategists respect her grasp of "pure politics" and her hard-nosed style. Her consulting businesses and access to data have made her a national political force.