

Lobbyist works with GOP, Dems for clients and civil rights causes

Contributed by Kevin Bogardus
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Elroy Sailor refused to take no for an answer when applying for a job in then-Michigan Gov. John Engler's (R) administration during the early 1990s.

"I decided I would have faith and stand tall ... I didn't give up," Sailor said. "I would keep playing the odds and they would say yes sooner or later."

Sailor had been working nights at a pizza parlor to keep his days free for volunteering on campaigns. He thrice sent his resume to Engler's team, and thrice was rejected before being hired to work on constituent services.

That first job in politics led to senior positions with Engler, former Sen. Spencer Abraham (R-Mich.) and former Rep. J.C. Watts (R-Okla.). Sailor joined Watts in lobbying when the latter left Congress to found his firm after the 2002 election.

Now, as chief executive of J.C. Watts Companies, Sailor's persistence is once again proving to be an advantage as he helps to manage Washington's biggest black-owned lobbying firm. The firm's stock has risen since its founding close to five years ago, with its lobbying income climbing each year.

Raised in Detroit, Sailor learned Republican principles - gun rights, fiscal conservatism, and pro-life values - not from the party, but from his parents, who were not what he would call "politically active."

"I did not know I was a Republican when I was 8 years old. I didn't even know what a Republican was," Sailor joked. Sailor comes from a large family; all told, his grandparents raised 18 children. "I was probably like the 60, 70-something grandkid," he said. "They said my father was low-key because he only had three kids," with the lobbyist as the eldest.

Both parents worked, Sailor's mother as a social worker and guidance counselor and his father at Ford Motor Company. Sailor's father also owned a convenience store where Sailor worked as a child.

He caught the political bug early, though, and began pitching in on campaigns in Michigan whenever he could. Leaving home at 16 to attend Morehouse College, Sailor was a White House intern during the George H.W. Bush administration in his sophomore year.

Returning to Michigan, Sailor worked on campaigns and off and on for Engler. One of his best memories, he said, is of a campaign stunt he helped engineer for the Michigan governor's 1994 reelection, which involved renting a hearse.

Sailor, along with other campaign staffers, scrawled slogans on the hearse: "The Death of Liberalism," "The Death of Taxes" - "anything that we considered to be anti-business, anything that was pro-family," Sailor said.

"We followed the [rival] campaign all day, and with the 7 o'clock news at night, you would see Howard Wolpe [Engler's Democratic opponent] pulling up with this hearse with 'The Death of Taxes,' with 'The Death of Regulation.'"

Laughing, Engler confessed he had "no firsthand knowledge" of the hearse.

"This was actually something I didn't hear about it until after the fact," said the former Michigan governor and current president of the National Association of Manufacturers in Washington. "Since Elroy knew the routes so well in Detroit, he actually showed up sometimes before the candidate did."

Sailor also honed his skills in building coalitions and crossing party lines while working for the governor.

"We had a tough job for him since he was working in the Detroit office ... and [he] had [to] defend the new changes we were bringing before they were even realized," Engler said. "In the process, he recruited lots of people who joined the administration themselves as appointees. He was quite persuasive."

Sailor joined the Republican Revolution that swept Washington in 1994 by going to work for Michigan's GOP senator, Spencer Abraham, from whose office he continued to reach across party lines.

"He helped us to build better and stronger relationships on a bipartisan basis with other Senate offices, which is sometimes hard to achieve," said Abraham, now the chairman and chief executive of his own energy consulting firm.

Sailor returned to Michigan once more to take a Cabinet position for Engler before being called back to Washington - this time with Watts.

"And before I knew it, I was calling Gov. Engler and I said, 'I have good news and bad news,'" Watts said. "The good news is this is the kind of person that I have been looking for. The bad news is he is on your staff."

Sailor called his time in the House "challenging and rewarding at the same time." The lobbyist was a top aide to Watts when he chaired the House Republican conference, fourth in power for the majority party at the time.

"Elroy has been pretty critical to that because of his reliability, more than anything," Watts said of his colleague's lobbying ability. "Any Republican or Democrat in this city who has dealt with him would say that is one of his strengths. On every play, you have got to know your right guard is going to be there."

Sailor's work on Capitol Hill and on K Street has included advocating for civil rights, such as the recent Voting Rights Act reauthorization, and pushing for a Martin Luther King Jr. memorial on the National Mall. At times, he has gone against traditional stances of the Republican Party, such as those on affirmative action.

"I don't like to box myself into adjectives. I am more a noun. I am a man," Sailor said. "From that perspective, I have a responsibility to the underserved community. I just feel like I do."

"He has been a fabulous colleague in many of the battles the NAACP has taken on here in Washington," the director of the group's Washington bureau, Hilary Shelton, said. "Elroy, somehow, in some way, has been very successful in forging left-right alliances from his time on Capitol Hill and now in his private practice."

Sailor has taken that expertise to J.C. Watts Companies as well. While adding Democrats for more bipartisan support, the firm continues to expand beyond its lobbying practice and recently has bought into several other industries, such as private equity, telecom and wholesale distribution in Africa.

"We have not just legislative or government-based solutions. We also have an industry-insider perspective on these solutions," the chief executive said, noting how the firm's other interests complement its lobbying.

"We are excited about being the first black-owned lobbying firm to really break through that glass ceiling" of the top firms in Washington, Sailor said.