

Rod Blagojevich will still have to make a living – but how?

By: Lisa Bertagnoli August 23, 2010

Regardless of the final outcome of his legal travails, Rod Blagojevich needs to make a living.

His career options run the range of the respectability index, from political consulting, public speaking and radio commentating on the relatively high end, to reality-show habitué, product pitchman or even Elvis impersonator lower down the scale.

Mr. Blagojevich's most bankable asset is his notoriety. A corporate gig? Not likely.

“Any indication of corruption is an absolute death sentence in today's age of corporate governance,” says Phil McCall, vice-president at Crist Kolder Associates LLC, a Hinsdale executive search firm. He sees the ex-governor's career following the same trajectory as those of other minor celebrities: “When does the book come out, when does the next book come out, when does this sit-down with Oprah come, and when do you dance with the stars?”

Indeed, Mr. Blagojevich has an agent, who says he's already lined up a product-endorsement deal.

“I can't go into details, but I can tell you that it's a project that involves doing a television commercial for a national product,” says Glenn Selig, founder of the Publicity Agency, a Florida-based public-relations firm. “He would be endorsing a product in a very fun way.”

MAKING MONEY

Mr. Blagojevich, 53, was found guilty last week of lying to federal investigators. He plans to appeal; prosecutors plan to retry him on the 23 charges on which jurors couldn't reach a verdict. What this means, besides uncertainty in the near term, is that he's going to have to make money, and lots of it.

The paycheck for the TV commercial “is a pretty good amount,” Mr. Selig says, adding that he's been approached with “real terrific offers” for Mr. Blagojevich as well as for Patti Blagojevich, 45, who did a stint on the reality show “I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here!”

“I see him making a career out of being Rod Blagojevich,” says Chicago journalist Elizabeth Brackett, author of “Pay to Play,” a biography of the former governor. “I think that's really the only thing he can do.”

Mr. Blagojevich is prohibited from holding public office in Illinois. He could lose his right to practice law. Lobbying is a possibility if his conviction is overturned, but not otherwise.



Rod Blagojevich, in the back row, appeared on — and was fired from — Donald Trump's "Celebrity Apprentice" last spring.
Photo by: Associated Press

After a corruption scandal that sent prominent lobbyists to prison in 2007 and 2008, the lobbying industry is under close scrutiny, says Gary LaPaille, former state senator and now president of mCapitol

Management Inc., a lobbying firm with offices in Chicago and Washington, D.C.

“It would be difficult for an elected official, even a junior staffer, to take a meeting with someone that has been convicted,” says Mr. LaPaille. Still, “never say never.”

Mr. Blagojevich's loquaciousness might prove valuable. Talk radio is an obvious platform. Mr. Blagojevich guest-hosted a show on WLS-AM/890 before his trial began. James Laski, a former Chicago alderman and city clerk convicted in 2006 on federal charges of bribe-taking, now has a show on WGN-AM/720. And former Chicago Alderman Cliff Kelley, convicted in 1987 of taking bribes, hosts a weekday show on WVON-AM/1690.

“He's a very gregarious person who a lot of people like,” says Mr. Kelley, 68. “He won't have a problem supporting his family.”

Mr. Blagojevich could “go back to one of the big radio stations and come across as a reformer,” says Paul Green, director of the School of Policy Studies at Roosevelt University.

Would Mr. Green listen? “Hell, I'd be on it,” he says. “He'd be spectacular.”

'FAILING GRADE'

Others say Mr. Blagojevich's performance as governor of Illinois—a state facing a grave budget crisis—is as crippling as his conviction.

“He gets a very poor if not failing grade as chief executive,” says Torrey Foster, managing partner for the U.S. Central region at Heidrick & Struggles International Inc., the Chicago-based executive search firm. “Add the ethical lapse and violation of public trust, and this is not a portrait of a compelling job candidate.”

For most corporate jobs, “Rod Blagojevich is out of play,” says Mike Tobin, a partner at Vantage Leadership Consulting Inc., an executive coaching firm in Chicago.

Still, Mr. Tobin muses, who knows what connections the former governor still has? “I wouldn't be surprised if he has offers right now.”

Those connections might make a post-conviction career easier for Mr. Blagojevich than for Betty Loren-Maltese, 60, the former Cicero town president convicted in 2002 of racketeering, mail fraud and wire fraud. She's bounced from being a restaurant hostess to now working out of her Evergreen Park home for a company that handles home foreclosures.

“Blago might have things easier because he knows so many people, people who owe him things,” she says.

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