

Crisis manager

Shea '88 faces early hurdles as governor's chief of staff



This wasn't how the story was supposed to go. When then-United States Senator Jon Corzine convinced his chief of staff, Tom Shea '88, to sign on as campaign manager for a run at New Jersey's governorship in 2005, the plan was to rescue the state from a series of political scandals and mounting fiscal woes. The multi-millionaire Wall Street wizard and his politically shrewd right-hand-man would save the state from certain financial ruin, solve the age-old property tax dilemma, and set forth a plethora of socially conscious initiatives, all before lunch on day one, or at least that's how the plot might have read in a fairy tale.

Since Corzine became governor on January 17, and convinced a reluctant Shea to join him as chief of staff, however, the script has read more like a horror story than fairy tale. The University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ) is the subject of ongoing criminal investigations and has seen its operations taken over by a federal monitor; the state budget picture is incredibly bleak; New Jersey's transportation infrastructure is in dire need of upgrade; and Corzine says he doesn't have any "magic bullets." So, in their first six months in the State House, Corzine and Shea have been forced to manage a series of crises, propose sales tax increases, and suggest drastic cuts in funding for higher education and other vital programs.

Shea, who accepted his position as the governor's top aide with eyes wide open, is undaunted by the challenges thus far. "The things we want to do aren't

by Matthew Golden

necessarily the things we are doing early on," he admitted. "Our first initiatives, in a sense, have been decided for us. You can't walk in here and be serious about changing a culture without taking on ethics reform, UMDNJ's issues, DYFS (the Division of Youth and Family Services), the Transportation Trust Fund, the budget, and school construction problems. We would have rather started on a more positive note, but these things desperately need attention."

Although he never aspired to his current job, Shea is precisely the right man for it, according to longtime friend and colleague Steve DeMico, head of Democratic political consulting firm Message and Media. "I met Tom in the mid-1980s, when he was a student at Trenton State College doing an internship with the state Senate, where I was working at the time. So we have a friendship and professional relationship that goes back about 20 years," DeMico said. "He is very astute on domestic and social issues, with a unique ability to get to the root of a problem. And everything he does is predicated on a great sense of humor that allows him to be a calming influence in tense situations."

Perhaps his ability to keep things in perspective, even while "looking under seat cushions for money to fill a \$6 billion budget hole," is the result of Shea's blue-collar rearing. He grew up in Mays Landing, NJ, and is the only of eight siblings to earn a bachelor's degree. Shea explained, "My father was a factory worker and local union member, and my mother was a secretary. I got my degree by working through college and taking advantage of programs like the Pell Grant and Perkins Loan. Without those programs, I would have probably ended up working next to my father in that factory."



Instead, Shea became fascinated with politics at an early age. "I was also fortunate to have some very positive influences and opportunities. One of my American history teachers, Gene Jensen, really piqued my interest in politics," Shea recalled. "And The College of New Jersey provided an entryway through internships in the State House."

That entryway proved to be the jumping-off point for a career that has included stops in Michigan, Washington, DC, Paris, and New York City. After graduating from TCNJ in 1988, Shea was hired as a staffer for the New Jersey Senate Democratic Office, working primarily as a researcher on legislative issues. When Governor Jim Florio took office in 1990, he hired Shea as deputy director of appointments. In that post, he screened candidates and made recommendations for various government posts. Eventually, Shea left to run Bill Clinton's presidential campaign in Michigan. Shea's tireless work ethic and sharp political acumen earned him recognition during the campaign and, ultimately, a position in the White House as special assistant to the president.

In 1995, Shea traveled overseas to serve as speechwriter and attaché to the United States ambassador in France. He returned to the U.S. one year later and became an aide at the United Nations. "In 2000, I managed to snag him again," DeMico recalled. "He came to work on Jon Corzine's campaign for the U.S. Senate as director of communications."

Corzine won the Senate seat and named Shea his chief of staff. The two have been working together for the past six years and have developed a deep and mutual sense of loyalty. "We have been through two statewide elections in New Jersey, and those are never easy," Shea said, only partially in jest. "Pressurized situations can bring people closer together, and that has been the case with us."

Corzine added, "Tom has been an indispensable resource for me as a trusted adviser and great friend. His leadership, wisdom, and service have undoubtedly improved the lives of countless individuals, including (my own)."

The bond shared by Shea and Corzine goes beyond the workplace, but it is also of vital importance when the two are

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tackling big issues. "When I walk into his office, I can say anything to him, good or bad," Shea explained. "And when I say something, people know it's as if he's speaking."

That bond is also the primary reason Shea has returned to his New Jersey roots after several years away. "This wasn't a job I dreamed of," he noted. "In fact, it wasn't even one that I really wanted. I am building a house down in Fort Lauderdale, and I thought I would be enjoying the sun and palm trees by now. When the governor asked me to do this, though, I couldn't say no."

Next up for Shea? "Who knows," he responded when asked. "I'm not a planner, in terms of my career. I have been given the chance to do some really interesting and, I think, important work. I have tried to do the best I can with those opportunities. When they stop coming, I'll head south."

Until then, Shea will keep his focus squarely on New Jersey.

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