

McGreevey finds a new stage, a decade after scandal forced him from office

By Ted Sherman/The Star-Ledger
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Former Gov. James McGreevey, at a conference a week ago with Gov. Chris Christie, has emerged back on the public scene in a way few could have envisioned only a few years ago. (*Reena Rose Sibayan/The Jersey Journal*)

JERSEY CITY — Even now, Jim McGreevey knows how to work a room.

Walking through a crowded conference center, he spots a familiar face and calls out in Yiddish. He hugs another, gently needles a judge and greets just about anyone else as a long-lost friend.

His last election was more than a decade ago, but the former governor — who resigned in disgrace after disclosing an extramarital affair with another man, who was put on the state payroll as McGreevey's homeland security adviser despite a lack of qualifications — hasn't lost his touch as a politician.

"Feel free to fast," he tells his audience, after first warning them that his budget for lunch that afternoon was not enough to feed everyone there. "We only have so much food."

He insists that everyone call him Jim. They all call him governor.

Re-emerging after years in the political wilderness, James McGreevey is back in the public arena. He was hired by Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop as the \$110,000-a-year executive director of the Jersey City Employment & Training Program, counseling former inmates on returning to society.

He serves as an adviser to the mayor, who many believe is eyeing a run for governor. Two weeks ago, he was speaking to students at Princeton University, and he participated in a comedy roast of Gov. Brendan Byrne earlier this month.

McGreevey says he's not returning to politics, declined to answer questions about himself, and refused repeated requests for interviews about politics and his future.

"I'd rather not be the focus of a story. I don't want my involvement to be a distraction to the work we're doing," he said.

The former governor said what he does, almost every day, is work with ex-offenders, addicts and those at the margins of society.

Former NBA star Jayson Williams, who did prison time in connection with the fatal 2002 shooting of his chauffeur and an unrelated drunk driving charge, hugs former Gov. Jim McGreevey after speaking at the Prisoner Reentry Conference at St. Peter's University in Jersey City

"It is not some heroic deed. It's what my faith asks of me. I do it to ... the best of my limited abilities," he said in a series of email exchanges. "This part of my life is not about electoral politics. If people ask advice, I provide my thoughts, but it's not what I do every day of every week of every month."

Calling his days as governor "far in the rear-view mirror," he said he is now in a different place. "My time has fortunately passed."

But while McGreevey's efforts on prisoner re-entry and substance abuse have put a renewed focus on the issues, his return to the public stage is apparent to many, putting him back on the scene in a way few could have envisioned only a few years ago. And, deny it though he may, there are plenty of political watchers who see a future that could include politics in a big way again one day.

"He greets everyone like he's going to be on the ballot next week," said John Weingart, director of the Center on the American Governor at Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics.

A graceful return

Weingart noted that others ensnared in very public scandals who lost their office — including former New York Democratic Gov. Eliot Spitzer, who resigned in 2008 amid a prostitution scandal, and Anthony Weiner, caught in a sexting scandal that drove him from Congress — have attempted comebacks that quickly rubbed the public the wrong way, making McGreevey's return more impressive by contrast.

"He's doing it remarkably gracefully, by spending years working with people that most don't pay any attention to," Weingart said. "Humble is not the right word, but he's done it with some sincerity and gracefulness. I think maybe like Jimmy Carter, he is going to be a better former governor than he was a governor."

State Sen. Richard Codey (D-Essex), who as Senate president succeeded the former governor when he resigned, said he believes McGreevey finds it difficult to walk away from a public role.

"I think there's a void in his life. So if that's what he needs, I'm happy for him," said Codey. "The last 10 years had to be tough for him and I understand that."

At the same time, though, there is a growing buzz among some political observers over whether the former governor may be trying to put the old band back together. Not only is McGreevey advising Fulop, but his former chief of staff, Gary Taffet, who left the administration under a cloud over a series of billboard development deals, is also now in Jersey City doing insurance work through the city's insurance broker, Acrisure, according to officials.

Those closest to him, however, say McGreevey is not looking to run for office again.

"That's not to say he hasn't been thinking about it, but every time he has thought about it, he's concluded that it would not be a good thing for him to do," said state Sen. Raymond Lesniak (D-Union), a friend and longtime confidant. "He readily acknowledges that's not a healthy way for him to go."

McGreevey's career has spanned the worlds of politics and advocacy. He worked as an assistant prosecutor in Middlesex County, served as a lawyer for the Assembly Democrats, and was executive director of the state Parole Board.

There was a stint as a lobbyist at Merck & Co., brief terms in the New Jersey Assembly and the state Senate, and then a campaign for mayor in Woodbridge, where he beat a former mentor in a rough campaign, despite an opponent who was facing bribery and conspiracy charges.

Serving as mayor of Woodbridge from 1991 through 2001, McGreevey challenged Republican Gov. Christine Todd Whitman in 1997, losing by just 1 percent. He launched a second campaign for governor four years later, defeating Republican Bret D. Schundler, the former mayor of Jersey City.

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It all came apart in 2004, when McGreevey — then married and facing the possibility of a sexual harassment lawsuit from Golan Cipel, an Israeli he named as his homeland security adviser despite questions about his qualifications — suddenly announced his resignation.

Declaring: "I am a gay American," the governor admitted he had engaged in an affair with another man, later revealed to be Cipel.

Following a bitter divorce that played out publicly, McGreevey kept a low profile as he studied for the ministry in hopes of becoming an Episcopal priest, and began counseling work at Integrity House drug treatment centers in Newark and Secaucus and at the Hudson County jail.

It is his work on substance abuse and prisoner re-entry that many laud him for, even among some of his political detractors, all of whom declined to speak on the record.

"He's making a substantial impact on those issues beyond Jersey City," said Lesniak.

Greater visibility

Still, last year there were signs of McGreevey taking a more visible role in New Jersey. He participated in an HBO documentary about his life, “Fall to Grace.” He joined a panel of former governors at the annual League of Municipalities conference in Atlantic City — something Lesniak said he had avoided in the past.

He attended a ceremony honoring Stephen Aduato Sr., the North Ward power broker who helped elect him. And he served on the transition team of Mayor Adrian Mapp in Plainfield, where McGreevey now makes his home.

“The governor was the governor,” explained Mapp of his turning to McGreevey. “He has a lot of knowledge and experience.”

Even Republican Gov. Chris Christie, who agreed to speak at the high-profile, daylong conference McGreevey organized this month at St. Peter’s University in Jersey City on prisoner re-entry — a conference also attended by U.S. Attorney Paul Fishman, former NBA star Jayson Williams, Fulop and others — had kind words for a predecessor he once had in his cross-hairs as U.S. attorney, as part of a criminal investigation into a top Democratic fundraiser.

Following his passion

While Christie said he agreed on practically no public policy issues, McGreevey needed to be a leader in the state on issues that he’s passionate and cares about.

“From the time I’ve become governor, I’ve reached out to him for advice and to urge him to get out more in public,” said Christie. “When you’re in these jobs, the advice you can get from somebody who’s actually sat in the chair is qualitatively different than the advice you can get from anybody else.”

McGreevey, hired by Fulop last year as executive director of the Jersey City Employment & Training Commission, is also giving advice to the mayor, who called himself lucky to have him.

“Any time someone can have access to a former governor, it is a huge advantage,” said Fulop, who said he wanted McGreevey for his expertise on prisoner re-entry issues, but also looks for political advice. “If I have a good opportunity to bounce something off him, why wouldn’t I do that?” he asked.

Making his way back?

Former state Republican Party chairman Tom Wilson said to see McGreevey in a public setting was not surprising.

“It’s not lost on anybody he’s in the kitchen cabinet of Steve Fulop. I don’t think there is anyone who ever thought Jim McGreevey would not find a way to weave a path to get back into public life,” he said. “Politics courses through his blood.”

Having McGreevey’s ear is a smart move on Fulop’s part, Wilson added.

“He’s heard it all. He can facilitate introductions. It’s incredibly helpful to have someone on your team who has lived through the fire before,” he remarked.

As for re-entering politics, Wilson said that would be a hard road of redemption. He had no doubts McGreevey cared deeply about the issues of prisoner re-entry and substance abuse, but he noted New Jersey is a very cynical state and said the governor would face new scrutiny if it looked like he was lining up the stones for a path back to office.

For now, Wilson said McGreevey has weaved a course that brings his public passion into the public space.

“He has retaken his position as a former governor, not a disgraced one,” he said.

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