

The case against Joel Greenberg: Records show how smear letters spurred sprawling prosecution

By JEFF WEINER and MARTIN E. COMAS

ORLANDO SENTINEL |

APR 08, 2021 AT 5:40 PM

On the day it was revealed that [Joel Greenberg plans to plead guilty](#) to federal charges to resolve the sprawling criminal case against him, local authorities released a pair of documents that trace the case against the former Seminole County tax collector to its possible origins.

The first was a report compiled by Deputy Jose Tirado, documenting his efforts to investigate an accusatory letter received by Trinity Preparatory School about a teacher in October 2019 — and how Tirado determined the teacher was not a suspect, but rather the victim of a smear.

The second was a report from the Sheriff's Office's forensics lab, confirming that several fingerprints found on envelopes used to mail that and other letters to the school matched samples from Greenberg.

Federal authorities would later take over the case, securing an indictment against Greenberg on stalking charges in June. They did not stop there. Before his plea negotiations were revealed Thursday, he had been indicted four times totaling 33 charges.

The fine arts teacher at Trinity Preparatory School was called into the academy's headmaster's office in mid-October 2019 — shortly after he had filed to run for Seminole County Tax Collector as a Republican, challenging the incumbent Greenberg — to answer questions about several letters the school had received that falsely accused him of sexual misconduct with a student and of being a white supremacist.

Reached Thursday, the teacher, Brian Beute, said he didn't want to comment about the case because it has not been settled.

“I ran against someone who lacks character,” Beute said. “I think this shows that: Do we the people, really scrutinize the people running for public office?”

The letter that arrived at Trinity Prep on Oct. 10, 2019, and sparked the SCSO probe was two pages: one, the letter from the fictional student; the other, a snapshot of Facebook Messenger conversations the writer claimed would corroborate the allegations against the teacher.

Beute told [the Orlando Sentinel in a story published the day before the letter arrived](#) that he'd filed to oppose Greenberg in the Republican primary because he was “very concerned about the troubling behaviors” of the first-term incumbent.

About eight days later, the newly released report states, an attorney for the teacher, David Bear, spoke to Tirado to deny the sex abuse allegations on his client's behalf. In the days that followed, he showed the deputy emails supporting the notion that his client was being smeared.

Bear also noted an earlier letter sent to the school that February, which alleged that the teacher was a racist. He named three people who could be behind the letters, records show. One was Greenberg.

The letters — authorities have said the school received a total of nine — were received by a lab for fingerprint processing on Oct. 30, 2019.

By early November, Bear had given the deputy evidence of social media accounts that were also smearing Beute, according to the documents. Prosecutors have since alleged Greenberg was behind Facebook and Twitter accounts that spread false sex abuse allegations against the teacher and portrayed him as supporting segregation and white supremacy.

The investigation of Beute quickly dissolved, the records show. A Trinity Prep official told Tirado on Nov. 5 that Beute was being allowed to return to work, and the deputy informed Bear that Beute was no longer a suspect.

By Nov. 7, a lab had identified “areas of interest” on the envelopes. Tests would later match a print from the flap of one envelope and two from the front of another to Greenberg, the newly released records show. And prosecutors have said DNA on the letters also matched Greenberg’s.

On Nov. 13, the deputy sent a subpoena to Facebook for the account that had been spreading allegations against Beute, the report states. Federal authorities have since said both the Facebook and Twitter accounts traced back to Greenberg’s home internet protocol address.

“Given the facts of the investigation, there is no evidence to identify Brian Buete as a suspect in any criminal activity against a child, therefore all findings are unfounded,” Tirado wrote, concluding his report. “... [T]his case

will be reassigned to our Major Crimes Unit for any follow up investigation for false allegations made against Mr. Beute.”

It’s unclear exactly when federal authorities picked up the case, but they arrested Greenberg on stalking charges on June 23.

When they searched his home that day, according to federal court filings, they found a pair of fake IDs in his wallet, which prosecutors have said Greenberg had used his office’s resources and customers’ discarded driver’s licenses to produce.

The investigation into Greenberg’s abuse of his access to those licenses, as well as the state’s motor vehicle database, eventually became part of a sex trafficking investigation and new charges that he’d falsified documents to enable commercial sex acts — including by a teenage girl.

The New York Times revealed last week the probe had grown to encompass U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz, a Greenberg friend, with authorities investigating whether the men recruited women online to pay for sex and whether the congressman was involved in trafficking the same girl.

Now, the stalking charge that emerged from a deputy’s inquiry into an anonymous letter delivered to an Orlando-area prep school a year and a half ago is Count 24 of 33, with the case’s ties to Gaetz thrusting Greenberg’s fate into national headlines.

On Tuesday, Bear said the smear attempt against Beute was “like opening a waterfall.”

“Joel Greenberg was trying to be bully against Brian,” he said, “... and he picked on the wrong guy.”