



'Business as usual'

by Sam Hanna, Jr. - posted Thursday, April 19th, 2012 @ 1:10 pm

Assistant U.S. Attorney Mignon Griffing should consider renting an apartment in Ouachita Parish, assuming she doesn't have one already. It would cut down on the drive time between her confines in Shreveport at the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Western District of Louisiana and the locale that's kept her quite busy of late in prosecuting public officials for manipulating their positions for personal gain.

A career prosecutor who's been with the U.S. Attorney's Office for about two decades, Griffing put another feather in her hat Monday when U.S. District Court Judge Robbie James sentenced two former Monroe city councilmen to federal prison for extracting bribes from a controversial local businessman, who's lucky the government took a pass on prosecuting him, too.

Former councilman Red Stevens got the worst of James' wrath, earning a 51-month sentence for his conviction last year on two counts of bribery and racketeering. Former councilman Arthur Gilmore got 41 months for the same charges. James lightened the load on Gilmore because his attorney, Charles Kincade, successfully argued his client should receive a lesser sentence since one of his criminal acts wasn't as egregious as the government would have us believe.

But both men are on their way to prison in June, assuming they won't be allowed to remain free on bond while their convictions are appealed. They're scheduled to be incarcerated, though, for engaging in some shenanigans with Eddie Hakim, a very wealthy businessman from Monroe. Ironically, Hakim was under investigation by the Internal Revenue Service for some possible misdeeds involving his taxes when he realized it was his civic duty to run to the government to report that Gilmore and Stevens were shaking him down. What a fine man, that Eddie Hakim.

It's a moot point that James set aside Gilmore's and Stevens' convictions and later reinstated them after it was determined that Hakim's tax issues had no bearing on the trial. It may be a moot point, but that doesn't change how it's received in the black community, which, judging by the grumbling in court Monday, views Gilmore's and Stevens' convictions as another example of black officials being persecuted, not prosecuted. Never mind that Gilmore and Stevens broke the law and were convicted for doing it.

It's a tall order to secure a conviction in federal court, where a jury must reach a unanimous verdict to find a defendant guilty. That a jury drawn from a jury pool in northeastern Louisiana determined Gilmore and Stevens were guilty tells us their behavior was far more than egregious. It was downright intolerable.

Griffing, though, along with the FBI, deserves a collective pat on the back for charging and convicting two elected public officials who obviously decided their personal concerns outweighed the needs of their constituents. And let's hope they continue to pursue cases against public officials who may believe they can engage in illegal activities and get away with it.

Yet, the most disheartening comment to surface throughout the process was offered by Griffing, who described the city of Monroe as an ongoing "criminal enterprise." If that's true, Griffing shouldn't have any trouble dragging crooks into court for years to come.

In the meantime, the entire northeastern Louisiana community got a black eye Monday because two otherwise upstanding public servants proved, yet again, that it's just "business as usual."

Sam Hanna, Jr. is publisher of The Ouachita Citizen, and he serves in an editorial/management capacity with The Concordia Sentinel and The Franklin Sun, three newspapers owned and operated by the Hanna family. Hanna can be reached by calling (318) 805-8158 or by emailing him at samhannajr@samhannajr.com.

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