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Abortion conversation at center of Tennessee race

by Brian Roewe

The outcome of the race for the 4th U.S. congressional district seat of Tennessee is now a ?priority for the pro-life movement,? according to a leading Democratic pro-life group.

In two press releases, Democrats for Life of America has focused their efforts on defeating Republican incumbent Rep. Scott DesJarlais after news broke that the pro-life candidate had pressured a woman to have an abortion.

?The fact that the Congressman urged a mistress to have an abortion disqualifies him from claiming the pro-life label,? said Democrats for Life executive director Kristen Day in an Oct. 15 statement. ?We urge all pro-life advocates and pro-life voters to immediately withdrawal their support from DesJarlais.?

Two days later, the group formally announced its endorsement of DesJarlais? competitor, Democrat Eric Stewart, describing him as ?a solid pro-life candidate.?

?We are proud to endorse Senator Stewart,? Day said in the statement. ?He understands and fully supports pro-life principles. In his public service career, Eric Stewart has always stood up for the least powerful and most vulnerable among us, including women facing unexpected pregnancies and their unborn children.?

The tides turned on what seemed at one point to be a non-race when the Huffington Post reported Oct. 10 that it had received a transcript of a September 2000 call between the DesJarlais, who is a physician, and a former patient with whom he allegedly had an affair.

The transcript details an emotional exchange between the two, with DesJarlais asking multiple times if the woman still intended to have an abortion.

"You told me you'd have an abortion, and now we're getting too far along without one," DesJarlais said, according to the Huffington Post transcript.

In multiple interviews, DesJarlais has not denied the conversation occurred, but attributed the abortion plea to frustration emerging from the conversation, telling the *Chattanooga Times Free Press* that he had brought up abortion in an attempt to have the woman admit she wasn't pregnant.

DesJarlais has also contested reports describing the relationship as an affair, saying he and his wife were separated but had agreed to see other people.

"Desperate personal attacks do not solve our nation's problems, yet it appears my opponents are choosing to once again engage in the same gutter politics that CBS News called the dirtiest in the nation just 2 years ago," a statement from his campaign to the Huffington Post read, referring to charges raised in the 2010 campaign related to his divorce.

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Running on a largely pro-life platform, DesJarlais won his 2010 election bid against Democrat Rep. Lincoln Davis as part of a wave of Tea Party victories that year.

Despite his efforts to squelch the controversy, the story has become known nationwide. In the wake, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney removed a DesJarlais endorsement link from his website shortly after the transcript story spread.

A Washington watchdog group, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics, has filed a complaint with the Tennessee Department of Health that DesJarlais violated medical ethics. And the Tennessee Conservative Union, the oldest and largest such organization in the state, has considered demanding DesJarlais exit the race.

On Wednesday, Stewart called the race a "dead heat," releasing a memo detailing an internal poll of 400 likely voters showing a 49:44 edge for DesJarlais with a 4.9 percent margin of error. If accurate, the internal polling numbers would represent an 11-point shift since June, according to the political new site TheHill.com.

How outside groups view the poll numbers could determine whether others join Democrats for Life in backing Stewart with both endorsements and cash.

The Tennessean reported that the latest fundraising figures from the Federal Election Commission showed DesJarlais still held an \$80,000 lead during the July 14-Sept. 30 period, adding to a \$650,000 overall advantage.

Some momentum could come from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, which elevated the Stewart-DesJarlais to its "Red to Blue" program, which highlights the top and most winnable campaigns nationwide and offers financial, grassroots and strategic support.

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