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Final Edition

**He fought to get Burris seated in the senate, now he tells the Sun-Times: 'I owe people an apology'**

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Staff reporters

SPRINGFIELD-On the same December day then-Gov. Rod Blagojevich named Roland Burris to fill President Obama's U.S. Senate vacancy, Burris' right-hand political man, Fred Lebed, phoned an associate and told him, "We'll have to do some things for the governor."

That's the recollection of the associate, a health-care and political consultant named John Ruff, who went on to become one of Burris' co-plaintiffs on a January lawsuit that sought to help Burris claim his Senate seat.

Besides raising new questions about a possible quid pro quo between Blagojevich and Burris, Ruff also recalled Lebed telling him he'd had discussions about Burris' interest in the seat with Blagojevich representatives as far back as October. That claim by Ruff contradicts what Burris said in a Jan. 5 sworn statement that is now part of a state perjury investigation.

In an exclusive interview with the Chicago Sun-Times, Ruff said he wants to publicly apologize for helping Burris. To show the degree of his involvement with the senator's camp, he produced telephone records showing dozens of calls between October and early February between himself and Lebed, Burris' longtime lobbying partner and close friend.

Lebed acknowledged speaking with Ruff. But he called Ruff's claims "totally false," chalking them up to Ruff's being upset over Burris not hiring him for a high-ranking job in Burris' Senate office.

"He's on a witch-hunt. He's fabricating all of this," said Lebed, who saved a recent voicemail message from Ruff in which Ruff called him a "motherf - - - - -."

"I don't know what John's problem is," Lebed said. "That's ridiculous."

Ruff acknowledged leaving the message, which he says reflects his frustrations over the possibility of being drawn into the perjury probe and a separate U.S. Senate ethics investigation of Burris.

Ruff is adamant that if prosecutors want to get to the bottom of whether Burris perjured himself, Lebed could be a key.

"There is more to be discovered," Ruff said. "I know the key to finding the information out is through Fred. That's the main point I wish to get across."

Burris' communications director, Jim O'Connor, did not respond to Sun-Times' questions about Ruff's claims. Blagojevich, who was arrested Dec. 9 on public corruption charges, has maintained he did nothing improper in naming Burris to the Senate.

**The Dec. 30 call**

Burris, Lebed and Ruff did lobbying and consulting work for Advocate Health Care in 2006 and 2007, state records show. Ruff, who had also worked in politics up through 2000, had stayed in touch with Lebed.

One of the calls between Lebed and Ruff came Dec. 30, before Blagojevich made the stunning announcement later in the day he was appointing Burris to the vacant Senate seat.

"He called me at 9:04 a.m," Ruff said of Lebed. "We talked for 12 minutes. He called to tell me that Gov. Blagojevich was appointing Roland as senator. I congratulated him and asked him how he managed to pull that one off. And that's when he made some flippant remark about 'We'll have to do some things for the governor.' "

Initially, Ruff thought nothing of it. But that was before Ruff heard Burris' evolving story about the circumstances behind his appointment -- including whether he was prepared to raise campaign cash for Blagojevich in exchange for the Senate appointment.

"At the time, I just didn't give that much thought to it because I did not believe they would agree to do any pay-for-play politics for that Senate seat," Ruff said. "But then Roland said down in Peoria, 'I attempted to raise money but was just unsuccessful.' My thoughts sort of raced back to that moment and realized there was something more nefarious, perhaps, that had been involved here."

Ruff also recalled Lebed telling him he'd had discussions about Burris' interest in the Senate seat with Blagojevich representatives as early as October. "He mentioned that he was talking to people on the governor's staff -- I believe he had mentioned [lobbyist John] Wyma, [chief of staff John] Harris and [former chief of staff Lon] Monk."

In the Jan. 5 sworn affidavit, Burris indicated none of his representatives spoke with Blagojevich or any of his emissaries about the Senate post before Dec. 26 -- a statement that contradicts what Ruff said Lebed told him.

Harris' lawyer, Terry Ekl, and Wyma's lawyer, Zach Fardon, said their clients have no recollection of speaking with Lebed about Burris' Senate hopes. Lawyers for Monk could not be reached for comment.

Ruff also said he is now "ashamed" of agreeing to Lebed's request to appear alongside Burris as a plaintiff in the Illinois Supreme Court case that ultimately helped Burris outmaneuver Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) to be formally seated in the Senate.

Lebed said he does not recall asking Ruff to be one of Burris' co-plaintiffs.

"Ruff asked what he can do for us," Lebed said. "John quickly got upset we weren't using him more. He was very upset we wouldn't hire him to be communications director and I don't know why. He was just way too pushy."

**‘A very scary guy’**

Lebed has a phone record of his own, which he said demonstrates Ruff is "a very scary guy." Lebed saved a profanity-laced voicemail from Ruff from Feb. 17 -- the same day Sangamon County's top prosecutor announced the perjury probe of Burris and the Senate launched its Burris ethics inquiry.

"You motherf - - - - - -, now I'm getting investigated," Ruff said on the message that Lebed played for the Sun-Times. "You can all kiss my f - - - - - - ass, Fred. Don't you f - - - - - - call me back."

Ruff said the message reflects the frustration he was feeling over the possibility he might be wrapped up in the perjury probe because his name is on the Burris lawsuit. Investigators have yet to contact him, he said.

"I probably sounded a bit like Blago there," Ruff said. "I just felt like they were putting a lot of people who tried to help them in harm's way.

"I feel I owe people an apology," added Ruff, who said he was with Burris in Washington on the day he was sworn in. "I started off believing that Sen. Durbin and Sen. Reid were wrong for denying him this seat. But I've come to realize most other people were right and I was wrong about this."

"He is lying through his teeth," said Lebed, who has no formal role with Burris' Senate office. "He's playing you guys."