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QUESTIONS ABOUT STATE REP'S PICK FOR SCHOLARSHIP;

Member of his state government 'family' got 4 free years at Southern Illinois

By Dave McKinney and the Better Government Association

SPRINGFIELD - State Rep. Dan Burke represents a Southwest Side district where three out of four residents don't speak English and less than one in 10 has a bachelor's degree.

So when it was time to hand out a free college education to someone under the century-old legislative scholarship program, whom did Burke pick?

Not someone who grew up in the working-class district straddling the Stevenson Expressway near Midway Airport. Instead, the 10-term lawmaker chose a young, Downstate woman he described as a member of his state government "family."

A joint investigation by the Chicago Sun-Times and Better Govrnment Association has raised unanswered questions about how Sarah Rae Dowis got nearly $70,000 in tuition set aside by Burke under a program beset for decades by cronyism, insider dealings and sleight of hand. Gov. Pat Quinn wants the General Assembly to abolish the program this fall.

Each legislator gets two four-year college scholarships to award every year and has the option of splitting them up so as many as eight people at a time can get a big discount, regardless of how well they perform in school. The state's public universities and community colleges have to eat the estimated $16 million price of admitting legislators' hand-picked choices.

The Chicago Sun-Times reported last week that the program has captured the attention of federal prosecutors, who twice this year have subpoenaed the State Board of Education for information on legislative scholarships that lobbyist and former state Rep. Robert Molaro (D-Chicago) handed out during his time in the Senate and House.

While Sarah Dowis' case has not drawn such scrutiny, she got four years of college tuition to Southern Illinois University set aside by Burke between 2003 and 2008. She is the daughter of his one-time legislative secretary in Springfield, Judy Dowis, who worked for him for a six-year stint ending in early 2003.

State law requires that recipients of these types of tuition waivers certify that they live within the awarding legislator's district. In Dowis' case, conflicting details exist about whether she really met that requirement.

In sworn paperwork she submitted to the State Board of Education, Dowis listed her permanent residence as a small bungalow in the 5700 block of South Homan Avenue. She even registered to vote there in 2005, mid-way through her college career.

Neither she nor her family owns that property. Instead, it's home to the elderly parents of Burke's Chicago-based legislative secretary, Teresa Sanchez, whose mother told the **Sun-Times** and BGA that Dowis used to show up occasionally.

"She stayed here part-time, and she stayed home part-time," said Mary Murdaugh, who said she opposes the legislative scholarship program and believes students should "work their way through" college.

Asked why Dowis stayed occasionally in her home, Murdaugh answered, "She wanted to be in the city part-time, I guess."

Agreeing that Dowis' time at the South Homan address was "sporadic," Burke said "delicate and private" personal issues confronting the young woman necessitated her move from Downstate to the Murdaugh home in his legislative district and justified her award of a legislative scholarship.

Burke, an assistant House majority leader, described his former secretary as a "single mother raising a teenage girl" who lacked the means to send her daughter to college.

"The girl was having issues," Burke said, declining to specify. "These people don't make an extraordinary amount of money. I made an exception and awarded her a scholarship."

Burke, the brother of Ald. Edward M. Burke (14th) and brother-in-law of state Supreme Court Justice Anne Burke, stressed that he made the award in the summer of 2003, only after Judy Dowis left his office to go to work for another lawmaker.

"I was compelled by this family's circumstance to do it. Her meeting the criteria, I did it," Burke said, calling the situation "certainly an unusual circumstance but certainly for no gain on my part."

"The public would not interpret that as a good Samaritan act," Burke said of his action. "They'd suspect there's some hijinks going on, that the mother or daughter was working on a political campaign for my benefit. But that's not the case."

Burke thought highly enough of his one-time secretary to award her a string of Christmas bonuses of as much as $1,000 from his campaign fund while she worked for him, state campaign records show.

Burke said he would "take issue" with any suggestion his former Springfield secretary was "part of the political culture. She's part of the government culture."

Before forwarding Dowis' tuition-waiver paperwork over to the State Board of Education, Burke's Chicago secretary, Sanchez, notarized the documents that listed the young woman's "permanent address" at the Homan residence of Sanchez's parents.

Dowis also submitted to Burke's office a copy of a state identification card listing the South Homan address as her residence, but she didn't obtain that card until two days after getting her first tuition waiver approved by Burke in July 2004.

That residency claim does not square with the address Dowis gave either the secretary of state to obtain her driver's license or that she provided to Southern Illinois University on her admissions application.

Between 2000 and 2010, on her driver's license, she disclosed to Secretary of State Jesse White that her home address was in Downstate Chatham, more than 200 miles away from the Murdaugh home. Her SIU application listed Downstate Divernon as her home, which is where her mother lives.

Burke said he could not explain the discrepancies and did not "monitor her comings and goings" but insisted he was certain Dowis did not create a sham residence in order to qualify for his legislative scholarship.

The residency question is important because Illinois law requires that legislative scholarship recipients live within an awarding lawmaker's district. Anyone who provides "false or misleading information" on their waiver paperwork can have their tuition waivers revoked by the state.

Recipients who falsify their scholarship applications also can be forced by the State Board of Education to reimburse their university for the full cost of the scholarship, though tough sanctions like that have never been imposed on anyone benefiting from the loosely regulated program.

Sarah Dowis, who now teaches in the Downstate Chatham school district after graduating SIU, did not return a message left at her home seeking comment on the matter. Dowis' mother, now a secretary for state Sen. Maggie Crotty (D-Oak Forest), said she didn't want to talk about the issue on a state phone because of ethical concerns and promised she'd call a reporter right back from her cell phone. That didn't happen, and she didn't return a subsequent call, either.

Told the details of the Dowis case, Senate Minority Leader Christine Radogno (R-Lemont), a leading advocate for abolishing the scholarship program, said Burke's explanation doesn't seem to add up.

"It sounds pretty difficult to believe all these coincidences that somehow make it right," Radogno told the Sun-Times. "On its face, it's just difficult to believe this one was done properly. It just reinforces that we need to get rid of the program."

Burke has consistently voted against ending the legislative scholarship program, including the last time the measure was put up for a vote in March 2010. It passed the House 80-36 but never got called in the Senate.

Last week, Gov. Quinn used his amendatory veto on legislation that would've barred lawmakers from handing out legislative scholarships to relatives. The governor rewrote the measure so the program would be eliminated entirely.

For his part, Burke said he has changed his mind about the program and will vote to end it if given a chance this fall. Asked why, the lawmaker said simply, "the headache of it."