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**Forest Lake Mayor-elect Stev Stegner**, facing camera, his wife, Lesa, left, and his parents, Howard and Emily Stegner, pray before eating on Thanksgiving Day.

# Campaign tale was shocking, sordid — and entirely false

Forest Lake candidate was accused of sexual misbehavior

BY ALEX FRIEDRICH

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On its face, it was a despicable tale: A married man running for mayor of a small town was sneaking into the Twin Cities for sex with Muslim girls. He got one pregnant, and threatened them — all illegal immigrants — with deportation if they told anyone of the affairs.

Sleazy. Predatory.

And a lie.

Twelve days before Forest Lake's Nov. 7 election, that tale was brought to the Pioneer Press after it had spread to many in the city. Two days after the candidate defeated the incumbent at the polls, it was recanted.

The target of the rumors — 42-year-old Forest Lake Mayor-elect Stev Stegner — has denied every element of them as “baseless” and offered proof he could not have fathered a child.

# Campaign rumor

(continued)

"It is so unbelievably bizarre that Forest Lake politics have turned into this kind of smear campaign," he said.

The core of the rumor — that Stegner is Muslim — is as puzzling as it is politically charged.

The Forest Lake native and owner of Rapid Press Printing & Copy Center on South Lake Street is a professed Christian who says he attends the interdenominational Evergreen Community Church in Bloomington.

But he cuts a stocky Mediterranean figure at 5 feet, 10 inches and 240 pounds, with olive skin from an Italian grandfather and the rest from German and French roots.

That has led him to guess: "Maybe I'm being targeted because of my dark skin."

## A CURIOUS RENDEZVOUS

Stegner's tale begins with a cloak-and-dagger meeting in Minneapolis in September.

He said he got a call from someone claiming to be a Jewish woman named "Sarah Goldberg." She said her son was being discriminated against at school in Forest Lake — he was not being allowed to wear a yarmulke or a Star of David — and no one would help her. As a mayoral candidate, would he?

Stegner agreed to meet Sept. 26, and the woman suggested he come to Holy Land, a Middle Eastern deli and bakery in Min-

neapolis.

He brought along Forest Lake activist Jim Heck, who has confirmed Stegner's account of what followed: The men waited in the deli for about 20 minutes. A woman in what they described as traditional Middle Eastern clothing approached Stegner and told him "Sarah" couldn't make it because her children were sick.

"I left, looking to reschedule," Stegner recalled, and he thought little of it.

He was never contacted again — but he was not finished with the Holy Land.

In late September or early October, a blond woman in a wheelchair came into Winnick Supply Inc. in Forest Lake, said owner Ben Winnick.

He recognized her from around the city but did not know her name. She identified herself as a Messianic Jew and told Winnick, who is Jewish, that Stegner was a Muslim who read the Quran in a Twin Cities mosque.

And she laid out photos of Stegner at Holy Land — standing in line or sitting at a table.

The snapshots were hazy and amateurish. But the woman told Winnick they were secret government surveillance photos and claimed the deli was once the hangout of Zacarias Moussaoui, the reputed "20th hijacker" in the Sept. 11 attacks who had attended an Eagan flight school before being arrested by the FBI.

Stegner, the woman told Winnick, "is not showing his true intentions" as a candidate.

Winnick said he initially dismissed her information as "babbling." He later denounced her attempt to create Jewish-Muslim tension in a community that has none and was concerned that she might be seen as a mainstream member of his faith.

Winnick wasn't the only person to hear the tale. Forest Lake residents Linda Beyer and Barb Nowicki heard the rumor around town and went to Steg-

ner's office to deny it.

"It cost me a lot of sleepless nights," Stegner said, "because I had so many people stopping in to see if it was true."

## A PATERNITY RUMOR

The stories soon morphed to become bizarre and defamatory. One version had Stegner falsely accused of getting a teenage Somali girl pregnant last year. In another, the pregnant girl was Iraqi.

Eventually, someone would claim to be the Jordanian mother of Stegner's unborn child in an apparent attempt to get the story into the Pioneer Press.

On Oct. 26, Forest Lake public relations professional Anne R. Gabriel phoned the newspaper. She had heard the rumors and agreed to try to help reporters find people who could confirm them.

Gabriel eventually tracked down and provided the cell phone number of a married Twin Cities woman, identified as "Rebecca Zollinger," who claimed to be sheltering a 17-year-old Muslim girl eight months pregnant with Stegner's child.

A woman who answered the number identified herself as Zollinger. She was Jewish, she said, and mistrusted Stegner and didn't like Muslims in general — but she was grudgingly sheltering the girl until the baby could be adopted by a family in her synagogue.

What would happen to the girl then? "My guess is she'll return to the projects," the woman said.

## MYSTERIOUS 'MISTRESSES'

The girl appeared Nov. 3, four days before Election Day.

At a meeting in the darkened apartment of Forest Lake resident Andy Meyer — who said she was being paid to interpret — the

girl and two others, all wearing apparently Muslim garb, spun a tale of seduction and abuse.

They were afraid to come forward. They had not reported anything to police, because they feared federal immigration agents would find and deport them. They agreed to speak only if their names were not used. They said they would be ostracized — even attacked — by siblings and other Muslims if they learned what had happened.

The girls said they were all 17 and lived in either St. Paul or Minneapolis. They were Afghani, Israeli and Jordanian. Their faces were covered with scarves and they wore sunglasses in the apartment.

Their stories, told in broken English, were parallel: They arrived in America at an early age with their families but were later abandoned, forced to work as maids. They found rooms with other Muslim families or in apartments with other Muslim women.

Each said she met Stegner in a restaurant or a deli, where at least one saw him reading the Quran. They described him as a rich, widowed businessman who enticed them with gifts and offers to help with immigration.

"He promised that if I made him happy, he'd marry me, and (my family) would all be citizens," said one girl. "I'd do anything to help my family, so I slept with him."

The girls claimed Stegner often became possessive, controlling and physically abusive.

The apparently pregnant girl claimed Stegner stopped seeing her after she developed morning sickness. She claimed her roommate kicked her out of her apartment after learning she was pregnant, forcing her to live in homeless shelters.

At one shelter, she said, she met Rebecca Zollinger's son, who was volunteering there and told his mother about the girl. Zollinger promised to shelter

her until the birth. After that, the girl said, a Jordanian family would take her back to her native country and help her get back on her feet.

"I want to return to Jordan," she said.

During the interview, Meyer — a blond Jewish woman in a wheelchair — provided hazy snapshots of Stegner eating in the Holy Land restaurant.

## A SCHEME UNRAVELS

It didn't add up.

The girls' accounts were riddled with inconsistencies and implausible coincidences. They could not say exactly when or where they met Stegner. The girls said they had no phones, so Stegner could never call ahead — yet he always dropped in only when they were alone and never when roommates were present.

They sometimes acted as if they couldn't understand a simply expressed English sentence — yet at times used relatively sophisticated English grammar and high-level vocabulary such as "escalating."

And one crucial detail stands in the way of the paternity claim: Stegner's 1991 vasectomy, for which he provided medical records.

Two other elements also seemed curious.

The phone number that Stegner said "Sarah Goldberg" called from when she summoned him to the aborted Holy Land meeting is the same number the Pioneer Press has used to contact Zollinger.

And the subject that Stegner says "Sarah Goldberg" wanted to discuss — religious discrimination at a school — was the same issue Meyer brought to the city Human Rights Commission in June, according to commission documents.

The Monday after the girls met with a reporter, Gabriel called the Pioneer Press and

she had been told immigration agents had come looking for the teens over the weekend, but they had escaped to a safe place in Milwaukee.

Three days later and with the election over, Gabriel called the paper and apologized, saying she had been duped.

"I've realized," she admitted, "this is an elaborate hoax."

As soon as it became clear a story would not run on or before Election Day, Gabriel said, her access to the girls dried up and requests to talk with them went unanswered.

Meanwhile, Gabriel said, details of Meyer's account of the girls' whereabouts seemed implausible. And Gabriel had called immigration lawyers to find out how to help the teens, and their advice contradicted information Meyer had told her she had received from another attorney.

"There are a lot of things that don't add up," Gabriel said.

Gabriel said Meyer was the person who connected her to Zollinger and the girls.

Meyer and Zollinger have refused to say much to the newspaper and have distanced themselves from the story. They did not return messages requesting additional comment last week.

Earlier, however, Meyer said she was hired only to interpret for the girls — in Aramaic — and agreed to hold the interview in her apartment.

"I have no idea who they are," she said. "Anne Gabriel and (Zollinger) asked me to get involved."

The woman who identified herself as Rebecca Zollinger — a name that does not appear in state records — said before hanging up on a reporter: "I want nothing to do with it. ... The girls are out of state, and I'm not dealing with it."

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Steve Stegner