

Last two judicial bribery defendants sentenced

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The last two defendants in what's been branded the Scruggs I judicial bribery case were sentenced to spend 24 months in federal prison for their roles in the scheme to bribe a circuit court judge.

Timothy Balducci and Steven Patterson both appeared before U.S. District Court Judge Neal B. Biggers this morning at the Federal Courthouse in Oxford.

Both men pleaded guilty a year ago to a charge of conspiring with Richard "Dickie" Scruggs, his son and attorney Zach Scruggs and his law partner Sidney Backstrom to bribe Circuit Court Judge Henry Lackey with \$40,000 for a favorable ruling in a lawsuit against the elder Scruggs involving legal fees in Hurricane Katrina related litigation.

During Balducci's sentencing hearing, U.S. Assistant Attorney Bob Norman told the judge that his department had never seen such "complete cooperation" from another defendant. He said Balducci's help has opened the doors to other investigations of corruption and that the Scruggs case got as far as it did because of Balducci's assistance.

"His cooperation was immediate," Norman said. "He's doing the best he knows how to do to right the wrong he has done."

Biggers agreed but reminded Balducci he was the "bag man" in the case.

"You carried the money," he said. "You talked the judge into going along with what you wanted to do."

Balducci told Biggers and the court that he was "profoundly sorry" for what he had done.

"All I can do now is try to make things as rights as I can," Balducci said.

Norman also reported that Patterson has cooperated with the government, albeit to a lesser degree than Balducci.

Patterson was called a "minor" participant in the case, although he received the same sentence as Balducci.

Before he was sentenced, Patterson said he was embarrassed and humiliated.

"If God gave me a choice to live carefree in paradise the rest of my life, or to choose to go back two years ago and change my actions, I would not hesitate to enlist to do the latter," he told Biggers.

Both men will report to prison on March 25. The government asked for the later reporting

dates because their testimony may be needed when the grand jury meets in the March.

The saga began on Nov. 27, 2007, when FBI agents raided Scruggs' office on the Square. The next day, the five men were indicted.

On Dec. 5, 2007, the day of his arraignment, Balducci pleaded guilty to the bribery charge.

It was later learned that Balducci had been working with the government in building its case against Scruggs and the others.

But it was also Balducci who got the ball rolling. In trying to gain favor with Scruggs, during a meeting with the other defendants in March 2006, he told the famous trial attorney that he could use his friendship to corruptly influence the judge to find in favor of Scruggs in the lawsuit Jones v. Scruggs.

After Balducci approached Lackey and suggested that if Lackey would find in favor of Scruggs, he would give Lackey a place in his law firm after Lackey retired. Appalled, Lackey told the FBI about the conversation. For six months, Lackey allowed his office and telephone to be tapped. In September 2006, in another meeting with Balducci, the subject of money came up and Balducci offered Lackey \$40,000. It was later discovered Scruggs was providing the funds.

Balducci was approached by the FBI in November 2007 and he began cooperating with the government and wore a wire tap himself on the day the money was given to Lackey.

Scruggs was sentenced in June to spend five years in a federal prison in Kentucky. His son is serving a 14-month sentence in Forrest City, Ark., and Backstrom is serving 28 months in Forrest City.

Earlier this week, Scruggs was sentenced to seven years in prison for his role in a bribery case involving Hinds Circuit Court Judge Bobby DeLaughter, which came to light during the Lackey case and through testimony of Balducci. The sentence will run concurrent with his original five-year sentence.

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