

As Lauren Book Hints at Run, Some Question if Her Charity Could Become Political Tool

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Courtesy of Lauren's Kids

Lauren Book has started a political fundraising committee, fueling speculation she might be considering a run.

As she climbed the hill leading to Florida's State Capitol last spring, Lauren Book broke from a walk into a run. The 29-year-old blonde with a pink ribbon wrapped around her ponytail raised both arms in the air and flashed a huge smile as she crossed the finish line. Her father, Ron Book, perhaps the most influential lobbyist in Florida, trotted beside her in running shorts.

Lauren had walked 1,500 miles, having started in Key West 42 days earlier on a mission to bring attention to childhood sexual abuse.

When she trekked through South Florida, Miami Heat coach Erik Spoelstra called her an "angel." When she was in Orlando, abuse survivors fought back tears as they joined her.

During a post-walk press conference on the Capitol steps, Fort Walton Beach Republican Representative Matt Gaetz bragged about freshly-passed legal reforms that would crack down on sex offenders - ideas "that were on Lauren's mind, that ended up on my legal pad, that are now in the laws of Florida." When it was Governor Rick Scott's turn to speak, he called them

laws "that I had the honor to sign."

A year later, Nancy Smith, executive editor of the Sunshine State News, which covers Florida politics, remembers the spectacle. "Cabinet members don't get that kind of coverage, that kind of interest... I don't understand how in four or five years, one person gets to this level with a charity."

One reason: Lauren suffered horrific sexual abuse at the hands of her nanny during her teens. She parlayed her pain into advocacy by founding a nonprofit called Lauren's Kids that has brought much attention to the issue and achieved national press including an appearance by Lauren on the *Today Show*.

But this past November, she founded a political committee, suggesting to many - including the *Tampa Bay Times* and *Miami Herald* -- that she's exploring a 2016 run for office. Speculation is that she's eyeing a state senate seat, Florida's 33rd District -- which includes Davie, Plantation, Hollywood, Hallandale, Miramar, Pembroke Pines, and Dania Beach. Incumbent Eleanor Sobel has served since 2008 and is reaching her term limit. So far the committee has raised more than \$400,000, as much as many active candidates garner in a whole election cycle.

"I have not made that decision," Lauren, now age 30, says via email. Despite requests over two weeks for an interview, she said she was too busy to sit down with *New Times*.

The potential of her candidacy has at least three insiders contacted by this newspaper bristling. Already, the insiders allege, businesses and politicians funnel money to Lauren's Kids to gain points with her father's powerful political machine. It's no surprise that such an ambitious young woman would seek office, they say, but it's worth critiquing the forces that are propelling her.

"Any big corporation that needs good press can make a donation to curry favor with [Ron Book]," says Nancy Smith, the Sunshine State News editor. Companies donate "so that he will represent them at some point, so that he won't go against one of their projects."

"Nonsense," says Ron Book. Any allegations of quid pro quo are "outlandish -- and completely false -- claims."

"Political points?" Lauren asked incredulously. "I want to be clear about one thing. I was raped every day for six years, and they were the six most horrible and horrific years of my life. I felt guilty, ashamed, invisible, bad, dirty, hurt and afraid every single day from the time that I was 11 until I was 16... Children in every community on the planet are also enduring the pain I suffered. I am trying to turn my personal pain into something positive and hopefully prevent this from happening to others."

Ron Book has represented some of Florida's richest companies - the Miami Dolphins, AutoNation, and Geo Group among them - as well as scores of cities and towns. He also helps raise millions for candidates seeking office. His firm earned \$5.6 million in fees in 2013, *the latest year available. This, he has said, is because he's effective as hell. He works from 6:15 a.m. until eight or nine at night, and jets between South Florida and Tallahassee more than most people go to the corner store. He has been described as both charming and dogged.

But this zeal has sometimes brought trouble: In late 1985, he came under investigation for allegedly helping to bribe an Opa-locka politician. The next year, he pled no contest to a misdemeanor in an insurance-fraud case. In the mid-1990s, he pled guilty to four misdemeanors after funneling more than \$30,000 in illegal campaign contributions to politicians.

In her 2011 memoir, *It's OK to Tell*, Lauren explains that her father was frequently away on business and her mother in the throes of mental illness when she was young. So, beginning in 1997, Lauren, then 12 years old, and her two younger siblings were left in the care of 30-year-old Waldina Flores. Lauren was shocked one night when Flores stuck her tongue in her mouth. Lauren, who had never even kissed a boy her own age, was confused and ashamed, and accepted Flores's explanation that it was a sign of love.

The abuse escalated to sexual contact. Flores threatened that Ron Book's career would be tarnished if Lauren was outed as a "lezzy." When at age 16, Book developed an age-appropriate relationship with a boy, Kris Lim, Flores retaliated by sodomizing her with a fork, she writes. Lim discovered the abuse and encouraged Lauren to tell. The nanny fled but was eventually caught, convicted of sexual battery and lewd and lascivious behavior, and sentenced to 15 years.

Lauren at 17 endured the additional trauma of testifying and having her name splashed in the news. The psychological toll was deep: feeling guilty after seeing her former nanny in court, she wrote letters to Flores, who defied a judge's instructions and wrote back, earning 10 more years tacked onto her sentence.

In 2004, Lauren would advocate for - and the legislature would pass - the Lauren Book Protection Act, making it a felony for offenders to contact their victims.

Lauren married Lim, who had become a pro golfer, in 2009. It was a million-dollar affair that was filmed for a reality TV show, *Platinum Weddings*, and described in ads thusly: "Daddy's Princess gets every wedding wish she ever desired." The couple divorced in 2010. In her book, Lauren says Lim had "an affair with the roommate of one of my closest girlfriends....another betrayal."

Lauren went on to become the public face of childhood sex abuse. She founded Lauren's Kids in 2007. The charity has three prongs: education, awareness, and advocacy. She organized her annual walk, sent out millions of flyers, and partnered with the state on a campaign to teach adults the signs of abuse. She wrote a children's book called *Lauren's Kingdom*; her face was plastered on billboards across the state.

Lauren even designed an abuse prevention curriculum that teaches concepts such as the difference between good and bad secrets. It will be implemented in all public kindergartens, and some higher grades. At the end of January, Lauren led a teacher training in Tallahassee.

Ron Book serves as president of Lauren's Kids. As he announced at the Capitol last year, "I advocate for changes in laws, I advocate for funding, knowing full well that I can't really fix what happened to Lauren."

Lauren's Kids nonprofit tax forms indicate that Ron Book spends 25 hours a week on the

charity, but does not draw a salary. He does not list Lauren's Kids as a client on lobbying disclosure forms, but he has been perhaps the state's most aggressive advocate for anti-sex offender laws. Most famously, he pushed for legislation that restricted where registered offenders could live; in Miami, this inadvertently led to a colony of offenders collecting under the Julia Tuttle Causeway.

Tax forms reveal how rapidly Lauren's Kids has grown. In 2007, gifts and grants were just \$1,500. In 2012, that number was up to \$2.5 million - with \$1.6 million coming from government grants. In 2009, Lauren, the vice president, was paid \$14,000; that figure jumped to \$85,250 in 2012.

Documents also show how the organization raises and spends its funds. A 2012 golf tournament had gross receipts of \$224,605 but expenses of \$192,998. The walk that year raised \$396,015; expenses were \$171,104. Lauren's Kids paid Ron Sachs, a communications firm that reps political insiders, \$670,032. *Sachs' firm won an Addy award for its design of a billboard that shows Lauren against a purple backdrop. "Lauren Book," it says. "Survivor. Educator. Advocate."

In the final days of the 2011 legislative session, Lauren's Kids was denied \$3 million it had requested for a program, but then awarded \$1.5 million that neither of the Books had requested. In 2014, an appropriations bill granted Lauren's Kids \$3.8 million, far more than any other of the 50-odd other similar beneficiaries; most received \$100,000 to \$500,000.

To some in Tallahassee, this is alarming. It amounts to taxpayers subsidizing publicity for Lauren, which would come in handy if she were to run. "All they do is put Lauren's name and face on billboards," says one insider who has spent decades in Tallahassee. If elected, companies could hire her father and expect her vote in return.

Lauren insists that no billboards are funded with tax dollars, and points out several Florida legislators who are related to lobbyists. If elected, she'd seek legal counsel on how to avoid any conflicts of interest. But she insists speculation is premature.

In 2010, Lauren considered candidacy for Broward school board. Political blogger Buddy Nevins advised her not to run: "Your leadership of Lauren's Kids is like motherhood and apple pie. It's beyond attack," he wrote. She opted not to run, saying "I feel we can push the foundation into more of a nationwide presence over the next two years," but added, "I will be looking at other offices."

This past November, Lauren opened a political committee called Leadership for Broward. It had raised \$423,750 at last report - much of that from Ron Book's past and present clients. The Miami Dolphins are the biggest donors, with \$100,000. AutoNation gave ten grand; The Geo Group, a corrections provider, \$25,000.

David L. Thompson, Vice President of Public Policy for the National Council of Nonprofits, was unaware of Lauren Book's dilemma. But he said that he'd advise any nonprofit leader running for office to step down from the nonprofit post.

"I guarantee that if Jerry Lewis was to run for office, his campaign materials would be amended to say 'formerly president of Jerry's Kids.'" He speculated that if Lauren ran, her existing billboards could stay without jeopardizing Lauren's Kids tax-exempt status, so long as they pass the IRS "facts and circumstances" test - i.e., if she did not put up campaign signage right next to them.

But unless someone were to lodge a formal complaint, or a challenger were to arise, the younger Book is probably a shoo-in. Lauren, who lives in a \$400,000 house in Plantation, doesn't have to file qualifying papers until June 2016, but has already scared off potential candidates seeking the senate post, which currently pays \$29, 697 annually.

Steve Geller, who served 20 years in the legislature, was considering running for the District 33 seat, but now admits he won't bother. Lauren, he says, "is a very formidable candidate" who has "virtually unlimited funds -- in a primary. I don't know any people who'd want to run against millions in a primary."

Even the best candidates could only expect to raise half a million, he says - a figure Lauren has nearly met. "I think Lauren will have whatever it takes to win, whether it takes two, three, or four million dollars."

Lauren said she wished critics "would speak directly to me so I can show them the amazing work we are doing on behalf of children."

Lauren may have quite a few people with whom she must speak directly. At least three groups from across the country plan to protest next month, when Lauren busts into Tallahassee during this year's Walk in My Shoes charity event. They oppose the group's advocacy for sex offender laws. Lauren is a "professional victim," says Derek Logue, an ex-offender affiliated with a Missouri group called Women Against The Registry. And her father, Ron, is a "fear salesman."

Logue and some others plan to be at the finish line protesting with signs. They'll probably be the only ones.

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