

# Billy Goat Tavern owner faces off against ex-Playboy model in judicial race



Tom Sianis, left, Corri Fetman, center, and Tim Leeming are running for a seat on the Cook County bench. (Abel Uribe, Brian Cassella, Antonio Perez / Chicago Tribune)

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**I**t may sound like a Mike Royko fever dream come to life, but an experienced family law attorney who once posed nude for Playboy is challenging a co-owner of the Billy Goat Tavern for a seat on the Cook County bench.

A longtime public defender known for his paintings of alleys and criminal defendants rounds out the three-way race for Cook County judge in the March 20 Democratic primary, which will ultimately decide who wins the \$194,000-a-year job, considering there are no Republican contenders to face in the fall general election.

With judges unable to campaign on political issues and dozens of races on the ballot each election cycle, many of them uncontested, most judicial races slip under the public's radar despite the power judges wield. But the race to replace retiring Law Division Judge Deborah Dooling has attracted a trio of interesting candidates — perhaps in part because no heir apparent was tapped for the job.

Retiring judges frequently put out word of their departure to party leaders well in advance, giving the three Illinois Supreme Court justices from Chicago — Democrats all — time to appoint a judge to fill the slot who can run with a leg up as an incumbent in the next election. But the candidates said that didn't happen when Dooling, a former prosecutor, announced her retirement last year — about a year into her six-year term.

Scion to a cheeseburger empire and a former Cook County prosecutor, Tom Sianis, 41, of Park Ridge, won the Democratic Party's backing despite having fewer years of legal experience; he now works for the state agency that regulates securities, and he also handles legal affairs for his family's Billy Goat Tavern. Divorce attorney Corri Fetman, 54, who lives near Logan Square, and public defender Tim Leeming, 56 — whose wife is a Cook County judge — both easily survived ballot challenges to remain in the race.

The judicial race would have been perfect material for the late Royko, a renowned, nationally syndicated columnist for the Chicago Daily News, Sun-Times and Tribune. His cantankerous columns lit up politicians and judges alike. Tourists flocked to see his seat at the Billy Goat on Lower Michigan Avenue, and he railed at times in his columns against what he saw as puritanical attempts to destroy "relatively stodgy" publications like Playboy.

Sianis says his breadth of experience — in criminal, securities and administrative law — makes him the most qualified candidate. Fetman said her three decades of legal practice in family law and a lifetime of hard work would make her a well-rounded judge versed in the law and that she is also able to relate to people. Leeming said his depth of experience in criminal law puts him head and shoulders above the other candidates and would provide much-needed perspective at the Leighton Criminal Court Building — home to many judges who are former prosecutors — where he believes he would likely end up.

New judges typically start out getting their bearings in traffic court, where any damage they can do is limited to disputes over blown stop signs and speeding, before moving on to another assignment.

Sianis' bid for the bench comes two years after the Cubs won the World Series, a victory that came after his family lifted a curse on the team. It was his his great uncle Bill who cast the curse after his beloved pet goat was not allowed in the ballpark — or so the story goes. While the "W" was the thrill of a lifetime, Sianis — who is married with two young children — said winning the election would be even greater.

"For the city, I think when the Cubs won that was bigger but personally it would be a bigger honor to be elected judge," said Sianis, enforcement division chief for the Illinois Securities Department and a Western Michigan University law school graduate.

Becoming a judge would be a capstone to Fetman's long legal career that has drawn the spotlight both for her Gold Coast billboard encouraging people to get a divorce and for her nude Playboy photo spread.

"I have a work ethic like nobody else," said Fetman, who says some of her friends still refer to her as "Barracuda Barbie" for her combination of ferocity and looks. "People say I'm intense. There's nobody who's more disciplined or dedicated to their work."

Fetman made international headlines a decade ago after commissioning a Viagra Triangle billboard featuring a scantily clad woman and a shirtless male — later revealed to be Fetman herself and her personal trainer — with the tagline: “Life’s Short. Get A Divorce.”

The billboard, up for a week before an alderman ordered it taken down, drew torrents of free publicity for Fetman’s practice and an offer to pose for Playboy. Soon judges and fellow attorneys were asking Fetman to sign copies of her magazine spread, she said, and she still receives fan mail.

Fetman also began writing a “Lawyer of Love” column for the Playboy website, but later filed a \$4.5 million sexual harassment lawsuit against her boss there, Thomas Hagopian, who allegedly groped her, bombarded her with sexually explicit emails and phone calls and took away her column when she rebuffed his advances.

The Playboy executive left the company and records show the lawsuit was later settled. Fetman said the terms are confidential. She later wrote a similar column for ChicagoNow, a network of blogs owned by the Tribune.

Fetman said she was sickened several weeks ago when she saw an attack ad dubbing her a “poser” over images of herself in a bikini at a bodybuilding competition and in front of her controversial billboard. The video appeared last month — just after she secured her ballot spot — on the Facebook page of Chicago Progressive Candidate 2015, a group linked to a Sianis campaign consultant.

“It’s body shaming,” Fetman said. “He didn’t attack the other male candidate, he only attacked me.”

“Posers, posers — we have enough of them in Chicago,” a gravelly male voice says in the video. “Do we really need another one who’s just posing to try to be a judge? Vote no on Corri Fetman’s idea of being a judge. We need judges who are real, not posing.”

The nonprofit Chicago Progressive Candidates was founded in 2015 by a group that includes political consultant Matt Harrington, who has received about \$10,000 since December from Sianis’ campaign committee, according to the committee’s campaign finance filings.

Sianis said he never authorized the ad and that when he learned of it this week he cut ties with Harrington.

“The ad is offensive, it’s inappropriate, I had absolutely nothing to do with that and I wish Corri all the best,” Sianis said. “That’s not how I run my campaign — I’ve never once said something bad about Corri. ... I’m running on my record.”

“It’s too little, too late,” said Fetman, adding that she also wished Sianis the best.

Harrington could not be reached for comment. Sianis said his former consultant has been hospitalized in recent weeks.

Although she did not get the Democratic Party’s nod, Fetman is a well-known, experienced divorce attorney who worked at a national firm and handled legal cases in state appeals court before launching her own practice

— which for a time only hired female attorneys — in 1995. She is going back to school to learn accounting. And Fetman said she also has some influential backers, like former U.S. Attorney Dan Webb, one of the city's most prominent lawyers now in private practice.

A spokeswoman for the law firm where Webb is a partner did not respond to a request for comment.

Leeming, who has spent 30 years in the public defender's office and now works in the legal resource unit, which handles exoneration attempts on the most serious felony convictions, is married to Judge Pamela Leeming, who was appointed to fill a judicial vacancy in 2009 and then elected three years later.

"In my house, it's ladies first," he joked, in part, about his wife getting a judgeship first.

The father of four became interested in law as an Arlington Heights high school debate student in 1977 researching criminal justice reform. But after getting his law degree, Leeming couldn't quite shake his love of art, attending the School of the Art Institute of Chicago on a scholarship. He still paints, now in the basement of his Oak Park home, and puts some of the work on display at a cafe in town.

Leeming, whose legal work has led to five murder convictions being overturned, finds the artistic process similar to his job as a litigator. Among the work he's most proud of is a series called "The Accused" — a series of portraits, inspired by the etchings of French artist Honore Daumier, that were a commentary on the criminal justice system.

"You're communicating something; organizing something and truth telling," he said. "You have to decide what to leave in, what to leave out."

When it came to running without party backing, Leeming said he wasn't afraid to throw his hat in the ring. "No offense, but we didn't ask anybody" for permission," he said.

Leeming said he has the most legal experience of the three candidates. While he respects Fetman's legal experience, he questioned the "moral expediency" of her divorce billboard, saying it made light of a topic that's often devastating for families.

"It's not a joke. Getting a divorce because life is short and here's a picture of a woman in her underwear? It's a serious business and it's a tragedy."

Fetman declined to respond to the criticism but said the billboard was about helping her clients live their best life.

"I believe it's a positive message," she said. "I would never minimize what people are going through ever."

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