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From Taylorville to Capitol Hill

Sen. Jon Corzine a key fund-raiser for Democrats

By DORI MEINERT
COPLEY NEWS SERVICE

WASHINGTON - U.S. Sen. Jon Corzine, D-N.J., spent last weekend crisscrossing the country, appearing at Democratic fund-raisers in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Houston, where he raked in \$425,000 for Senate Democratic candidates.

On average this past week, the former Taylorville resident spent about five hours a day working the phones in his never-ending quest for money to help Democrats take control of the Senate.

Corzine, 57, has one of the party's hardest jobs. As chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, his task is to recruit candidates and to raise enormous amounts of cash to help them win.

"Raising money is hard work. It's a little bit of salesmanship and a little bit of reasoned conversation with folks who are inclined to help if you just know how to ask," Corzine said in a recent interview.

Throughout his career, the multimillionaire bond trader-turned-senator said he's drawn on lessons he learned while growing up on a farm about five miles east of Taylorville at a place called Willeys Station.

It instilled in him a strong work ethic and the confidence to take calculated risks, which profited Corzine in his previous job as chairman of the Goldman Sachs investment firm and which he hopes to use to bring victory for Democrats in November.

While his Wall Street experience makes him more comfortable discussing money than most senators and gives him valuable financial connections, more important is his passion for the cause, he said.

"I feel very strongly about the purpose and the mission," Corzine said. "The agenda and the challenges to our foreign policy and how we've handled the economy would be different if the Democrats were in control of the U.S. Senate."

Corzine's fund-raising prowess has gained him more notice in party circles than most first-term senators ordinarily receive.

But the proof will come on Nov. 2, when election results show whether Democrats have retaken the Senate, which has a 51-48 Republican majority

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with one independent.

"Corzine has led a committee that has made the best of a tough situation," said political analyst Jennifer Duffy of the nonpartisan Cook Political Report. "The Democrats entered this election cycle with a pretty bad hand. None of it was of their own doing."

The Democrats have 19 seats up for re-election, compared to the Republicans' 15.

Corzine told reporters this week the battle for control of the Senate remains a "toss-up." Corzine's GOP counterpart, Sen. George Allen of Virginia, predicted the Republican majority will grow from 51 to 54 in November.

Duffy and other independent analysts have said that Democrats have only a slim chance of capturing the coveted 51 seats.

Former classmates from Taylorville High School, where Corzine graduated in 1965, say he has always been an overachiever. They weren't surprised, they said, when they read reports that he made \$400 million while at Goldman Sachs. Four years ago, Corzine spent \$60 million of his own money to gain the name recognition that he needed to win the U.S. Senate seat in New Jersey.

Now, he is mentioned as a possible candidate for governor of that state or as treasury secretary if John Kerry is elected to the White House. Polls rank him the most popular statewide office holder in New Jersey.

"He was extremely industrious, working, playing sports, being a really good student," recalled Bill Summer, a high school friend who lives in San Diego. "He was great with people, a natural leader."

Corzine was quarterback of the football team, captain of the basketball team, National Honor Society president and class president, to name just a few of his high school activities.

David Hixenbaugh, assistant superintendent of the Taylorville School District, recalls how they worked together at a summer job laying railroad ties.

"It was more work than I've ever done in my life," Hixenbaugh said. "He lasted much longer than I did ... it was a tough job."

Childhood friends attribute Corzine's work ethic to his parents. His father, the late Roy Allen Corzine, farmed 120 acres, only 40 of which he owned. He sold insurance on the side to make ends meet. His mother, Nancy, who lives in Chicago, was a schoolteacher.

They were a middle-class family, comfortable but not wealthy.

Ironically, for a man who today plays such a prominent role for Senate Democrats, Corzine's parents were Republicans. His grandfather, Roy Corzine Sr., was a three-term Republican member of the Illinois House.

"Politics was always a central focus of most debates around the House," Corzine said.

But living and working on the family farm steered him to become a Democrat. He watched his father and other area farmers helped by federal farm programs.

"I always saw a legitimate role for government as a participant in our lives, as a partner, not as a dominator," Corzine said.

His father and other farmers also taught him that risk-taking, combined with hard work, can bring in great rewards.

"I always said - even when I was on Wall Street - that my father took greater risks than I did. You put a bunch of seeds in the ground in the springtime and you expect to have harvest in the fall. But all kind of dangers can transpire in between - floods, drought, tornadoes ...

"I've always admired the willingness of people to take risks for good ends, as I saw in that community. I ended up being a bond trader. I believe that to get good things, you have to take measured and thoughtful risks. You can't be reckless. You have to be thoughtful at it," Corzine said.

His liberal views crystallized during his college years at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he graduated in 1969 with majors in political science and economics. While he didn't participate in any of the campus protests of the turbulent 1960s, he said the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, all had an impact on him.

When it appeared he would be drafted, Corzine joined the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, where he served from 1969 to 1975. He also took his first banking job in Chicago, attending classes at night to receive a master's degree in business administration from the University of Chicago in 1973.

Corzine was hired as a bond trader by Goldman Sachs in 1975 and rose to become chairman in 1994. He was reported to have made \$200 million when he took the company public in 1998, but he also made enemies along the way. He resigned in 1999 in a dispute with the firm's partners.

Within weeks, he was exploring a run for the Senate. After his election in 2000, rather than take a low profile as most new senators do, he became a leading critic of President Bush's tax cut proposals and an advocate of corporate accountability.

"Certainly, Corzine had to overcome the image of a wealthy businessman who had bought a Senate seat," said David Rebovich, political science professor at Rider University in New Jersey.

He's worked hard to "humanize" himself, working the New Jersey diners and senior citizen homes to show his concern for the average citizens in the state, Rebovich said.

But his marriage to his high school sweetheart was a casualty of his Senate success.

When his divorce from his wife of 33 years was made final last November, Joanne Dougherty Corzine, also a Taylorville native, issued a statement saying her husband's political career had "a noxious effect" on their family

life and his conduct led to their divorce, it was reported.

On Capitol Hill, Corzine is described by other senators as easy-going and unassuming.

"He's one of the friendliest senators of either party He doesn't come off as some sharpie from the East Coast," said Sen. Peter Fitzgerald, R-III. "You'd think of a partisan attack dog having that role (as DSCC chair), but that's not the type of person he is."

Fitzgerald worked with Corzine to limit the government's liability in the airline bailout following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-III., said he and Corzine talk about Illini basketball, which the New Jersey senator still follows closely.

"I just feel very comfortable with him. He's like a neighbor to me in terms of his outlook on life," Durbin said.

Corzine was being pushed by New Jersey Democrats last month to run for governor if Gov. James E. McGreevey resigned in time to allow a special election in November. When that didn't happen, Durbin and other Democrats were relieved.

"I'm sure he's going to make a more specific decision about his future after the first of the year," Durbin said.

Corzine invited another old high school friend, Jack Mazzotti, who owns Rene's Drug Store in Taylorville and chairs the Democratic Party of Christian County, to a recent fund-raiser in Chicago.

"It's easy to get caught up in this. I like to think I've never forgotten my roots," Mazzotti recalled Corzine saying. "I told him, "Jon, you never did.""

If Corzine remains in the Senate, his work as DSCC chair won't go unnoticed. At a minimum, it could win him a good committee post. Sen. William Frist, R-Tenn., who once headed the NRSC, went on to become majority leader.

And, Corzine's contacts with donors might come in handy again someday.

When Corzine was running for Senate four years ago, his Taylorville High School buddy Bill Summer pulled out his yearbook and rediscovered an entry from Corzine that seemed eerily close to predicting his political future.

"P.S. Remember to vote for me for Pres. in '92." Corzine wrote.