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Lawmakers Know Sting of Gambling Losses

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BODY:

The unexpected phone call from the coroner in Las Vegas came on Nov. 4, 1997, Election Day in the city of Annapolis. The somber message interrupted a day of politicking for Del. Michael E. Busch, the future speaker of the Maryland House of Delegates and next-of-kin to the deceased.

Busch immediately boarded a plane for Nevada, where his father had spent more than two decades in self-imposed exile, living in a flophouse on the fringe of downtown Las Vegas, the gambling capital of the world.

Larry Busch, once a successful small-town lawyer, father of the local football hero and three girls, had mysteriously abandoned his family and career in the early 1970s. Without explanation he moved west, where he lived out his days as a recluse, a small-time card shark who preyed on naive tourists in the casinos on the weekends.

The son tried to claim his 72-year-old father's belongings but was told there were none. Just the dead man's clothes on a bed in the rooming house, a couple of Social Security checks that hadn't been cashed, an envelope containing his identification cards and an empty wallet. The body was cremated. No obituary or death notice in the papers, nor any memorials to mark his passing from emphysema.

To this day, no one knows what inspired Larry Busch to leave his family and his Glen Burnie law practice, why he was drawn to the seedy side of glittery Las Vegas. There had been no evidence he was a gambler in Maryland, save for the occasional hand of poker.

Some thought maybe he was too prone to drink. Others figured he was depressed.

"It's a mystery that no one will ever know the answer to," Busch said in an interview in his office in the State House. "All of a sudden one day, he just up and left. He never saw my mother again. He never saw any of my sisters. I tell you, I have a real tough time talking about it."

What is clear is that the rise and fall of Larry Busch left an indelible impression on his son, who in January ascended to one of the most influential posts in Maryland politics.

Since becoming speaker, Busch (D) has emerged as the leading foe of the movement to legalize slot-machine gambling in Maryland.

Although his views on slots were known before the General Assembly convened for its annual 90-day session last month, the depth of opposition has caught many lawmakers off guard, including his longtime friend, Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R), who is leading the charge to bring casino-style gambling to the state.

But Busch says neither Ehrlich nor anyone else in the General Assembly knows the story of Larry Busch, a secret he has kept hidden from even his closest allies.

Busch, 56, agreed to talk about his personal history for this article, but did so reluctantly, saying he was worried people would misconstrue his position on slots or dismiss him as an anti-gambling moralizer.

"People are going to say, 'No wonder Busch is against this, it's just because it's a personal family issue.' But that's not it," he said. "I've certainly gambled before. I accept it for what it is. I'm not making a judgment on my father or others who do that.

"But the point of this is that I have had great exposure to the issue. I understand more about gambling than most people, more than I should probably admit to. When people talk about bringing 4,500 slot machines to a racetrack or casinos in the Inner Harbor, I know exactly what that means."

Busch is not the only prominent lawmaker in the General Assembly whose stance against slots is shaped by personal experience.

In the summer of 1955, a Charles County farmer named Henry Middleton cashed a check for about \$ 600, the entire proceeds from his wheat harvest. Then, over a 48-hour period, he gambled away almost every nickel.

In those days, slot machines were a common sight in Southern Maryland, a huge money maker for taverns, motels and country stores along the U.S. 301 corridor, then a major north-south highway.

Although Middleton was not a frequent gambler, the father of 14 children decided to try his hand at the slots in Waldorf. He hit a run of bad luck and, desperate to win back his money, kept losing more.

By the time he was done, Middleton had lost the entire wheat check, which his family was relying on to pay taxes and put food on the table.

For a time, he thought he might be forced to sell his 288-acre farm, which had been owned by Middletons since the 17th century. A relative bailed him out with a loan, but the experience turned him against gambling for life.

The episode also shaped the politics of one of his seven sons, Mac, who later became a state senator and now serves as the influential chairman of the Finance Committee.

"I just remember we were one worried family, that we didn't know how we were going to make ends meet," said Sen. Thomas M. Mac Middleton (D-Charles). "It was a very humbling experience for my dad and my family."

Three years after almost gambling away the farm, Henry Middleton embarked on a political career, winning election as a judge of the Orphans Court in Charles County, a post he held for 28 years. He used the part-time job as a pulpit to rail against gambling, which held great sway over the local economy.

Back then, Southern Maryland was known as Little Nevada, one of a handful of places in the United States where commercial gambling was legal. County budgets were heavily dependent on gambling dollars, but the slots were loosely regulated and served as a magnet for organized crime. After a fierce debate that lasted years, the state banned the machines in 1963, although they were not completely phased out until 1968.

Mac Middleton took over the farm from his father and still raises cattle and Christmas trees when he's not legislating. He is now perhaps the most outspoken opponent of slots in the Senate.

Unlike Busch, Middleton tells his family story often and with little prompting.

"My dad saw the evils of slot machines," said Middleton, 57. "I tell people that he would turn over in his grave if I wasn't part of some kind of opposition, if I didn't try to resist in some way."

Larry Busch was a self-made man. He paid his own way through college and took night classes at the University of Baltimore's law school. He founded a two-man law practice in Glen Burnie and made decent money from criminal work and domestic cases.

He and his wife, Pat, had four children. The oldest by seven years was Mike, a natural athlete who brought a measure of fame to the family. Mike starred in football at St. Mary's High School in Annapolis and earned a scholarship to Temple University. In college, he broke the school single-game rushing record and drew heavy interest from professional scouts.

His senior year, Mike badly injured his knee. It ended his dream of playing in the pros, a dream shared by his father. In hindsight, Busch wonders if his injury weighed more heavily on his dad than he realized. "In some respects, he lived vicariously through me," he said.

Friends of both men doubt that the football injury prompted Larry Busch to abandon his family not long afterward. But they remain at a loss to explain his behavior.

"They were close, him and his father were very close," said George F. Johnson IV, a longtime friend of the Busch family and now the sheriff of Anne Arundel County. "It's mind-boggling why things unfolded the way they did."

One day, Larry Busch left the house and never came back. He stopped work on his legal cases and failed to show up for hearings. A Circuit Court judge tracked him down, asked him if he was out of his mind and told him he better start paying attention to his clients. He refused.

"All of a sudden, he was among the missing," said Richard L. May, a friend and lawyer who practiced on the same block in Glen Burnie. "He was a great father when Mike was growing up with athletics and all, until all of a sudden came this change. He just turned into this recluse."

Larry Busch's family struggled in the wake of his actions and was quickly forced to make painful adjustments.

Suddenly on her own, her husband refusing to pay child support, Pat Busch had to care for three daughters, the youngest of whom was 4 years old. She took an entry-level job with the Motor Vehicles Administration, sold the Busch's big Colonial-style house in Severna Park and moved the family to Baltimore to live with her mother.

Mike Busch graduated from Temple and landed a job as a history and social studies teacher at St. Mary's, his alma mater. But with little money of his own to contribute, he felt helpless.

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"I obviously witnessed the residue it left on my mother and my younger sisters," he said. "My mother, she was the greatest. She had to go back to work and take care of everybody. Nobody in my life is more of a hero than my mother."

Larry Busch floated around Maryland for a couple of years, before deciding in 1975 to move to Las Vegas. Upon leaving, he told his son: "I'm 50 years old. I want to live the rest of my life and not worry about anything."

It would be 15 years before Mike Busch heard from his father again.

On almost a daily basis since the legislative session began, Busch and Middleton have issued stark warnings about the downside of bringing huge numbers of slot machines to Maryland.

Ehrlich's proposal would legalize 10,500 of the machines, about half the total number in Atlantic City. They would be confined to four racetracks, three of which sit in blue-collar or predominantly black neighborhoods.

Busch and Middleton argue that it makes no sense for the state to plunk gambling temples in the middle of poor communities, places that already struggle with crime and joblessness. Such operations will breed social ills and tempt the elderly or working-class people to gamble away their savings, they say.

Not everybody sees it that way.

The Ehrlich administration projects that slots would eventually generate \$ 1.3 billion a year for the state treasury and the horse-racing industry. Under the governor's proposed legislation, the state would set aside \$ 500,000 annually for programs to help compulsive gamblers.

In a recent interview, Ehrlich was asked if he ever knew anyone with a serious gambling problem.

"I know people who have gotten into trouble with alcohol, and chocolate and gambling," he said. "There's a small percentage of society who cannot handle freedom."

Added his second-in-command, Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele: "It's a behavioral issue. Just like smoking. You wanna stop -- you stop."

In 1990, Mike Busch, by then a state delegate, received an unexpected phone call from his father, who said he was still in Las Vegas but refused to disclose his exact whereabouts. It was an awkward renewal of their relationship.

After pressing his father to allow him to visit, Mike Busch flew to Nevada. But Larry Busch got cold feet and failed to show at the airport. With no address or phone number, his son returned home.

Months later, they tried again. Mike Busch promised that he would not pass judgment, he just wanted to make peace. This time, his father agreed to a reunion.

Over the next seven years, Busch made several trips to Las Vegas to visit his father. They did not talk about the past, at least not about the painful parts.

But the son got a taste of his father's lifestyle, which included regular casino visits. They gambled together, mostly card games, seven-card stud and blackjack.

"When I visited my father, I enjoyed his company," Busch said. "We played cards, we bet on football games. I did it all. Sometimes I left with an extra buck or two, sometimes I lost a buck or two."

Larry Busch took his son to some of his favorite haunts: the Frontier, Binion's, occasionally the Golden Nugget. The casinos gave their customers discounts on meals and drinks, helping Larry Busch get by on a meager income from his winnings and Social Security.

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Mike Busch retains vivid memories of his visits to Las Vegas, particularly of older people like his father who lived unglamorous lives amid the neon and the high rollers.

"I don't want people to think I have this aversion to gambling," Busch said. "I've come to grips with all of it. I don't begrudge people who want to go bet on horse races.

"But my perspective on this is that I have a pretty thorough understanding of what's involved in gambling of this magnitude, so I'm very cautious about sending Maryland in this direction."

Staff writer Jo Becker contributed to this report.

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