

| **BOB NORMAN'S PULP** |

Fort Lauderdale Tea Party Leader Speaks Out on Sarah Palin

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By day, Gabriel Jose Carrera works as a bespectacled immigration attorney, but in countless off-hours during the past 18 months, he has had another calling: leading the Fort Lauderdale Tea Party to help elect candidates like Rick Scott, Marco Rubio, and Allen West.

Carrera is one of the original leaders of the Tea Party. He started stumping for his favorite candidate, Rubio, at gun shows across South Florida in 2009. At the shows, he would pass out Rubio T-shirts and another item he said always raised the ire of those in the gun crowd: photographs of Rubio's U.S. Senate opponent Charlie Crist hugging Barack Obama.

He went to political events and made numerous Tea Party videos that he posted on Facebook and YouTube. Carrera protested on the corner of North Federal Highway and Oakland Park Boulevard and walked neighborhoods where he left hundreds of political packets on doors.

During the July 4 weekend Tea Party rally when radio talker Joyce Kaufman made her infamous remark about bullets over ballots, he could be found manning the hot dog grill. And after all the events and protests, Carrera would socialize with his compatriots at the Jib Room bar on Oakland Park.

That's the way the Tea Party was, says Carrera. You did whatever needed to be done. Although he often served as the face of the party, Carrera is quick to say he's not *the* leader of what he describes as a "slightly disorganized grassroots movement." There are others who led the local effort, people like GOP activist and blogger Javier Manjarres, organizer Patrick Castronovo, and the mother of the party in Fort Lauderdale, Danita Kilcullen.

Carrera was a local Tea Party leader, but what was he leading? What exactly is the Tea Party? Carrera can't seem to define it, though he takes a stab at defining himself.

"I don't like Republicans because they are bastards, and I don't like Democrats because they are assholes," he told me. "I try to be Gabe. I guess I consider myself a

constitutional conservative."

The Tea Party itself has never been properly defined it, least of all those who identify with it. It manifested itself during the last election cycle as a loud and amorphous storm on the face of U.S. politics, full of sweeping and often vicious rhetoric, loud speeches by fringe folks, and a dime-store brand of "I'm More American Than You" patriotism.

The movement is political backlash personified (with a Toby Keith soundtrack). It's known much better for what it despises -- immigration, Barack Obama, health-care reform, regulations of all kinds, liberals, and Democrats -- than anything it stands for.

So I turned to Carrera to find out what the Tea Party really is -- and after several hours of interviews, it turns out that, like the movement itself, Carrera is a mass of seeming contradictions.

He's a former criminal gang member and drug addict who found God in what he describes as a jailhouse miracle. He was ordained as a Pentecostal minister by Ohio televangelist Rod Parsley in his late 20s and became a fundamentalist missionary. Even later in life, he went back to college and graduated from Nova Southeastern University Law School in 2005. But he still remains a fire-and-brimstone believer in what he calls "God's law."

A first-generation Cuban-American, he's stringently anti-immigration while at the same time representing illegal immigrants in court. He's deadset against Mexican immigration and was an early proponent of the wall on the border, but he supports opening the doors for Venezuelan immigrants who want to get away from leftist dictator Hugo Chavez.

He's greatly opposed to health-care reform, decrying government involvement in insuring people. Yet he and his wife can't afford health insurance while his kids -- you guessed it -- get health care through a State of Florida program.

He has a tattoo of Confederate flag on his body (he won't say where) but says he didn't put it there in honor of the pro-slavery Confederacy but because he identifies himself as a rebel. Ideologically he's the polar opposite of John Lennon, but he listens to classic Beatles songs like "Revolution" and "Helter Skelter" to get himself pumped up for political action.

Carrera is a big fan of right-wing pundits and radio talkers, with his favorites being Glenn Beck, Michael Savage, and Rush Limbaugh, in that order. He's also a friend of and believer in Joyce Kaufman. He was of course there for Kaufman's speech (grilling the dogs) during which she proposed bullets as a political remedy. And Carrera said he had a visceral reaction to those words. "I was like, 'Hell yeah!'" he told me. "Is Gabriel Carrera going to run down the street and start shooting any government official? No. I think that statement is more symbolic. It says we can change our government."

He said those words prior to the Tucson shooting that targeted U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords shooting, and

he says nothing has changed since about the way he feels.

Carrera is also, not surprisingly, an ardent supporter of Sarah Palin's. "When you make fun of Sarah Palin, you are making fun of me," he said. "When you are hitting her, you're hitting me."

Palin infamously included Giffords' district under an image of a rifle's sight in one of her political posters, an act that Giffords herself condemned on cable television in March, telling a national audience that Palin needed to understand that such violent imagery could have consequences.

Giffords was also reviled by the Tea Party, which routinely labeled the congresswoman a "traitor" during weekly protests in that town. After she voted for health-care reform in March, someone smashed the window to her Tucson political office. Two days later came Palin's crosshairs poster.

Carrera, however, says that Palin's name never should have even come up in the Tucson coverage.

"I take it very personally," he said. "I think the media is connecting her to that, and it is irresponsible. I think it's erroneous. I think it's an attempt by the left to make sure she's not elected president in 2012."

Another reason he may be touchy about the Palin topic is that in his only attempt at elected office so far, Carrera became embroiled in an eerily similar controversy, one that involved a heartbreaking murder that captured the nation's attention, accusations of hateful and dangerous political rhetoric, and even a campaign poster that allegedly included an extremely controversial bull's-eye target.

This is the first part of a series on Tea Party leader Gabriel Jose Carrera. Part two will tell the story of Carrera's campaign for state House that rocked a town.

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