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Tenney highlights ‘notorious’ background of Brindisi’s father

Nicole Gaudiano, USA TODAY Published 2:09 p.m. ET July 14, 2017 | Updated 7:32 p.m. ET July 14, 2017



(Photo: Nicole Gaudiano, USA TODAY)

WASHINGTON — In a re-election campaign that has barely begun, Rep. Claudia Tenney is already launching a character attack against her new opponent, Assemblyman Anthony Brindisi, by making an issue of his father’s “notorious” background as a lawyer who decades ago represented defendants with ties to organized crime.

While unloading on her Democratic challenger during a Thursday interview with USA TODAY, Tenney, R-New Hartford, N.Y., sought to highlight the “great contrast” between her own father, the late state Supreme Court Justice John R. Tenney, and Brindisi’s father, Louis, who she described as “very heavily involved with the organized crime in Utica for many years, representing them.”

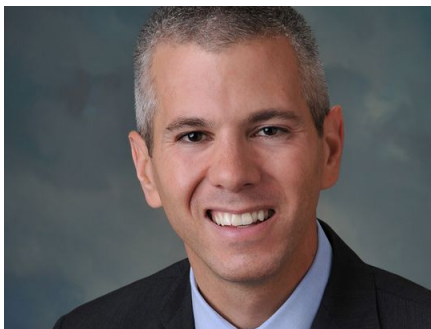
“He fought for law and order and Anthony’s father represented some of the worst criminals in our community,” Tenney said, looking at a picture of her father, during a wide-ranging interview in her D.C. office. “You have to question ... some of things that have happened in his family. The voters make that decision. I’m not saying Anthony is part of any of that but that’s the family you come from.”

Asked whether she thinks that makes a difference, she said “the issue is about where you come from.”

“His background is significant,” she said. “I can’t tell you how many people have come up to me in my community and said, ‘Wow, I don’t feel comfortable about some of the background that he has.’”

Brindisi’s campaign manager Ellen Foster responded:

“Because Congresswoman Tenney can’t defend her disastrous record on healthcare, jobs and public education, she is resorting to attacking someone who won’t even be on the ballot — and it’s clear she already thinks she’s behind. Anthony Brindisi believes that name calling never created a job in Upstate New York. And if personal attacks are the only play in Claudia Tenney’s playbook, she will lose this election.”



State Assemblyman Anthony Brindisi is running as a Democratic candidate in the 22nd Congressional District. (Photo: Provided by Brindisi)

Brindisi, of Utica, officially launched his campaign just over three weeks ago, on June 28. He is a personal injury lawyer who serves as “of counsel” at the law firm Brindisi, Murad, Brindisi & Pearlman with his father, who now specializes in personal injury and wrongful death.

Utica’s Observer-Dispatch described Louis Brindisi in a 2009 story (<http://www.uticaod.com/x1518870796/The-Mob-Files-Day-7>) as someone who made headlines in the 1970s “representing rough characters linked to organized crime.” He told the newspaper then that he gave up criminal defense work shortly after a young attorney was killed by an intruder in his office in 1983. “I just didn’t want to be involved with any criminals,” he said.

Spreading rumors of mafia connections is not unusual in politics, said Gerald Benjamin, a political science professor at the State University of New York at New Paltz. It’s a known tactic for mobilizing anti-Italian bias. But such references typically come from surrogates, not the directly from candidates, themselves, he said.

“The degree to which it’s unusual is its overt and direct quality,” he said. “It’s often stuff that goes on in a whispery way, not overtly like that.”

James Testani, former Broome County Democratic chairman and former president of the Binghamton Sons of Italy, called the comments “shocking” and “disturbing,” given Tenney’s position.

“As a former president of the Sons of Italy, we’ve seen it before,” he said. “We’ve seen the anti-Italian stereotyping. Anytime your name ends in a vowel people feel it’s fair to take the mafia shot at you. It’s really horrible.”

Clearly, this will be a cut-throat race.

Two days after Brindisi launched his campaign, Cook Political Report downgraded the freshman Tenney’s chances, shifting their race rating from “likely Republican” to “lean Republican.” House editor David Wasserman wrote that Tenney’s “unique vulnerability” stems from bad blood with moderate Republicans, while citing Brindisi’s “good profile for this working-class, substantially Italian seat.”

In launching his campaign, Brindisi targeted Tenney as inaccessible for refusing to hold town halls and as “an unquestioning rubber stamp” for Republicans on critical issues, including health care.

During the interview, Tenney bristled at that assessment.

She called Brindisi a “dream” opponent for her. While Democrats are pushing his moderate record and “A” rating from the National Rifle Association, she called him a liberal progressive who is part of “the machine in Albany.”

Tenney said she likes Brindisi, personally.

“I think he’s a nice guy, and I’ve worked with him in the Assembly, but he’s making ridiculous accusations against me,” she said. “Very unfortunately, he’s going to make it a campaign that’s not going to be about issues. It’s going to be about distorting my record. He’s already saying I’m not independent. Seriously? Someone like me?”

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