

Gifts a siren song for politicians

By JOSH KENYON

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I spent my 37th birthday alone, wondering where all my friends had gone.

Back when I was chief of staff to Mitch Skandalakis, then chairman of the Fulton County Board of Commissioners, and later under his successor, Mike Kenn, I had hundreds of friends — or so I thought.



Sunny Sung/AJC

[\(ENLARGE\)](#)

Josh Kenyon (right) poses in 2004 with retired FBI agent Oliver Halle, who asked him to identify two people in a photo supposedly passing cash. By identifying Michael Hightower and George Greene, Kenyon also led the FBI directly to himself, as he was taking payoffs from Greene, too.

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In those days (1996-2000), I would get cards, sports and concert tickets, invitations to fancy meals and other seemingly innocuous gifts every year on my birthday. Like many politicians today, I rationalized accepting these gifts by thinking of them as gifts from friends.

But when you're sitting in federal prison, which is where I turned 37, those so-called friends want nothing to do with you.

Considering the attention now being paid to airplane trips provided to former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Texas), former Atlanta Mayor Bill Campbell, Georgia House Speaker Glenn Richardson (R-Hiram) and other politicians, I hope my story will serve as a lesson to those who may be seduced by vendors or lobbyists. My downfall began not by my asking for gifts or bribes, but by accepting offers of meals and tickets from people doing business with the county.

Once it was known that I was willing to be taken to an expensive restaurant such as Bone's or to a concert, the vendors started raising the ante in a bidding war of sorts for my "friendship." By accepting even a lunch, I had conveyed to people doing business with the county two important facts.

First, I was revealing that I was someone who would take things. Second, I was unwittingly sending the message to vendors that a good way to build a relationship with me was to take me out on the town.

I never thought that I would be someone to take a bribe, so I was stunned one day when I was given a bank envelope full of cash by a vendor I considered a good friend. After all, I had not asked for it. But had I? By taking anything of value at all, by being seen at Bone's as the guest of various vendors, had I not created the impression that to gain an edge over a fellow vendor, one would have to one-up the competition?

I never asked for a bribe, but my actions helped create the atmosphere that would cause a vendor to offer one.

I rationalized accepting gifts of escalating value by convincing myself that they were just gifts from friends. After all, I was not explicitly asked to do anything for the gifts, and the givers seemed to really like me. My conscience was so numbed by the environment that I was ultimately able to rationalize accepting cash from a vendor.

I did not have the moral fortitude to do the right thing when faced with the ultimate test, and I paid for my character flaws by spending six months in prison. I was released on Oct. 15, 2004.

Not all public officials will be seduced by meals and gifts, but some will. As long as meals, free plane rides and gifts are viewed as business as usual by public officials, we will see my story sadly repeated. I hope my story will serve as a wake-up call to other public officials.

Going to prison is no fun, and learning to live with yourself after letting down your friends, family and the residents of Fulton County is even worse.

- Josh Kenyon of Sandy Springs is a recruiter for an Atlanta staffing agency.