



In North Carolina Elections, Misleading Susan B. Anthony List Ads Star Koch Brothers Operative

By Sharona Coutts

July 30, 2014

Ned Ryun and Becca Parker Ryun are a telegenic couple, who star in a heart-wrenching 65-second advertisement that targets North Carolina's incumbent senator, Democrat Kay Hagan.

The Ryuns tell the story of their daughter, Charlotte, who was born severely premature—at 24 weeks gestation—but survived and thrived.

“I didn't think, at 24 weeks, you could have a viable baby,” Becca tells the interviewer. “It's a human being. It wants to live. It has a soul. It has a will. It has a desire to live,” says her husband, Ned.

The emotive video then shows images of the couple's smiling daughter, as Ned says, “For those that are advocating late-term abortions, look at my daughter.”

The ad finishes with the message that Kay Hagan is “too extreme for North Carolina,” due to her support for later abortions.

It's a slick production, and a moving story, paid for by the Susan B. Anthony List, a leading anti-choice group, which announced last month that it was going on another advertising buying spree of up to \$100,000, buying ads targeting Hagan, who is facing a tough battle to retain her seat in this year's midterm elections.

The Susan B. Anthony List is known for misleading ads. In fact, earlier this year, it went to the U.S. Supreme Court to defend its right to lie in political advertisements.

So it may come as a small surprise that the ad tells only part of the story of the Ryuns, presented as an all-American couple, who could well be from North Carolina.

In reality, Ned Ryun has a long history as a Republican operative with close links to the Tea Party and the Koch brothers—context that may well change how viewers see the conclusions he and Becca drew from what was undoubtedly a deeply emotional, personal experience. Neither Ned Ryun nor the Susan B. Anthony List returned *RH Reality Check's* requests for comment.

Ned and Becca Ryun don't live in North Carolina. The couple lives in Purcellville, Virginia, with their four children.

Ned's father is Jim Ryun, the former Republican U.S. Representative from Kansas who served ten years in Congress. Jim Ryun is best known for his achievements as an Olympic athlete (he was a Silver Medalist in the 1,500-meter race in the 1968 Mexico City games), and for his consistently conservative views. For instance, Jim Ryun voted against No Child Left Behind, the Bush administration's marquee education law that was intended to boost poor-performing schools. People of all political persuasions objected to the law, but not for Ryun's reasons: He voted "no" on the basis that states should have more control over education policy and rejected the need for additional funds. This, despite the fact that Kansas has some of the nation's lowest performing public schools, and the greatest race-based inequality in educational opportunity. He also voted to ban adoptions by same-sex couples, to ban family planning as part of US foreign aid, and against an array of reproductive rights measures. His voting record earned him a zero rating from NARAL.

Jim Ryun now runs Christian running camps, where attendees "learn how to apply racing, training strategies, and as well as hear from top Christian athletes who will share how their faith has helped them reach their fullest potential."

It's not just Papa Ryun who is immersed in conservative politics.

Ned himself is a former speechwriter for George W. Bush, while his twin brother, Drew, was a deputy director at the Republican National Committee.

Along with their dad, the Ryun brothers have turned Tea Party politics into a family business.

Drew and Jim Ryun are leaders of the ultra-conservative Madison Project, a group whose views of an array of things, including Europe, read more like the satirical news site *The Onion*.

Referring to many European countries' policies on abortion, the Madison Project's website says:

In Europe, the duly elected representatives in parliament decided the issue. Being that Europe is a morally decedent leftist utopia, they elected politicians who reflect their values.

Ned heads up American Majority Inc., a 501(c)(3) nonprofit entity whose goal is to "create a national political training institute dedicated to recruiting, identifying, training and mentoring potential political leaders."

While it claims to be non-partisan, American Majority Inc. says it is committed to promoting "individual freedom through limited government and the free market." In reality, that has mostly meant the Tea Party. Ned even wrote a monthly column in *The Spectator* called "With the Tea Partiers."

Like the brothers, American Majority Inc. has a twin—a 501(c)(4) called American Majority Action, which is led by Drew.

Together, the American Majority organizations have donated to numerous Tea Party groups across the country, according to the entities' tax filings. In 2010 the American Majority apparatus gave \$520,000 to radical groups, including \$22,500 to the St. Louis Tea Party in

Missouri; \$5,000 to the Jefferson County Tea Party in Missouri; and \$275,000 to Grassroots Outreach, a Tempe, Arizona-based firm that has been linked to voter fraud.

They have also made multiple donations to so-called 9/12 Project associations. The 9/12 Project is linked to Glenn Beck, and its goals include “tak[ing] over the Republican Party.”

The American Majority nonprofits are licensed to do business in at least 34 states, and have drawn controversy for tactics such as paying field staffers in Ohio up to \$10 an hour to get out the vote during Mitt Romney’s 2012 campaign. Traditionally, field canvassers have been volunteers.

Just as interesting as who *gets* money *from* American Majority is who has donated *to* the Ryuns’ political operations.

An analysis by *RH Reality Check*, based on numbers collected by the Center for Media and Democracy, shows that American Majority received \$3.9 million from DonorsTrust and its affiliated entity, the Donors Capital Fund, between 2010 and 2012. That puts American Majority among the top 15 recipients of DonorsTrust funds.

DonorsTrust is one of the largest pass-through entities for conservative giving. Essentially a legal form of money laundering, DonorsTrust facilitates contributions from anonymous donors to be channeled toward conservative groups they specify. The Center for Media and Democracy names DonorsTrust as a key component of the Koch brothers’ political web.

Between 2010 and 2012, the Donors entities distributed \$252 million to a wide range of groups, including the Koch brothers-affiliated Americans for Prosperity Foundation, the Mercatus Center (a bastion of libertarianism, partly founded by the Koch brothers, according to Daniel Schulman’s recently published history of the Koch family, *Sons of Wichita*), and the right-wing Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity.

And the Ryuns’ connections to the “Kochtopus” don’t end there.

According to *The American Spectator*, the idea for the American Majority groups “was conceived” by the Sam Adams Alliance, an organization that was active from 2007 through 2011, whose mission was to encourage “citizen engagement in politics, with specialties in studying and training citizen activists and bloggers.”

The alliance was headed by long-time ultra-conservative and libertarian Eric O’Keefe, who has been close to the Koch brothers for decades. According to his online biography, O’Keefe worked on the Libertarian Party presidential campaign in 1980, in which David Koch was drafted by his older brother, Charles, into running as the vice presidential candidate.

O’Keefe became close with another member of the Kochs’ inner circle, Ed Crane, who ran at the top of the Libertarian Party ticket and then spent the next few decades leading the Cato Institute, the extreme “free market” think tank that was almost entirely funded by the Kochs. O’Keefe joined Cato’s board in 1988. According to the Center for Media and Democracy, O’Keefe also worked for a group called Citizens for a Sound Economy, which was the predecessor to the Koch’s new funding vehicle, Americans for Prosperity.

Thanks to O’Keefe’s ideas about training citizen activists, the Ryuns are now emerging as potential rivals to Karl Rove, and his enormous political machine, as masters of the “shadow” conservative movement, where power is held not by elected representatives, or even by the Republican National Committee, but by a cadre of highly paid consultants and deep-pocketed donors.

In addition to American Majority, the brothers have established at least two other entities that feed into the extreme right’s political infrastructure.

In 2012, American Majority reported using nearly \$900,000 from its nonprofits to support a new outfit, called *Media Trackers*, a site that says it is “dedicated to media accountability, government transparency, and quality fact-based journalism.”

In reality, *Media Trackers* has made claims about voter harassment in Wisconsin that *PolitiFact* later found were “mostly false,” and the group was active in attempting to undermine the Wisconsin effort to recall Gov. Scott Walker.

Media Trackers is “a project” of another nonprofit entity with the Orwellian name Greenhouse Solutions. Tax filings show that Ned’s brother, Drew, and their father, Jim, are on the board. (It’s noteworthy that of the three bills noted by American Majority Action in its 2011 tax filings as particular lobbying targets, one was the NATGAS Act, a bipartisan measure intended to support natural gas. The name “Greenhouse Solutions” appears to literally be the opposite of what the Ryuns work toward.)

However, perhaps the Ryuns’ most promising new entity is a voter database company known as Gravity. (It goes by iterations of that name—sometimes called Political Gravity, and sometimes, Voter Gravity.)

Political parties increasingly rely on sophisticated voter databases to win elections, and they’re willing to pay high premiums for the best data, and those who know how to wield it.

In the aftermath of Mitt Romney’s loss in the 2012 presidential race, the relative inferiority of his team’s database—known as Orca—became a key sore point for Republicans. Since then, competing teams in the shadow conservative world have been racing to build new systems to match up with the Democratic Party’s data tools—and with each other. *Politico* last year reported that the Koch brothers have established a political data company called i360, while Karl Rove’s group, Liberty Works, is also putting together a platform—each attempting to build the dominant conservative data tool.

And then there are the Ryun twins, whose Gravity platform was expected to pass 1 million voter contacts by late 2012, propelling them into the financial center of right-wing politics.

The company’s website boasts that “while Romney’s ‘Orca’ was going belly-up on Election Day, another group of conservatives were enjoying the fruits of labor that began long before voters headed to the polls.” Increasingly, they are being taken seriously as highly connected conservative heavyweights.

While none of this detracts from Ned and Becca Ryun’s experience with the premature birth of their daughter, it does change the way viewers might see the conclusions that the couples drew from that experience.

The Ryuns are far from being “everyday” North Carolinians. They are ensconced in the ultra-conservative movement, and their income derives from convincing the public of their very particular worldview.

It would be fair to say that, if North Carolina voters knew the reality of who the Ryuns are, they’d be less inclined to see Kay Hagan as an “extremist,” and more likely to look closely at what the Ryuns believe.

Moreover, Ned Ryun’s failure to disclose his conflicts of interest raises questions about how much trust can be placed in the views he expresses.

Not only did he and the Susan B. Anthony List neglect to mention Ned’s extensive Koch brothers connections, but neither group mentioned that they had worked together in the past, when they both helped to launch Ohio Life and Liberty in October 2012. Nor did Ned disclose that the Susan B. Anthony List had contributed \$28,000 to his father’s political campaign. (Koch Industries contributed more than \$86,000.)

But Ned Ryun’s failure to disclose even extends to his interest in Voter Gravity.

On the company’s Facebook page, a reviewer purrs about the quality of Gravity’s service: “It was a bit of a no brainer for me to use Voter Contact: They saved me lots of money and got me a better product.”

The reviewer gave Voter Gravity a five-star rating.

Political Gravity’s account then replies, “Thank you Mr. Ryun.”

That’s right. That reviewer was Ned Ryun, who replies—possibly to himself—“You bet. This is good stuff.”

If the Ryuns’ entity, *Media Trackers*, is intended to police truth in the media, perhaps they should take a look at themselves. Surely they’d see no conflict of interest with that, either.

Sofia Resnick contributed research to this report.