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GEPHARDT'S TOP AIDE HAS HER OWN POWER BASE

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JOYCE ABOUSSIE slowly taps her watch. From the back of the room, she's telegraphing House Majority Leader Richard A. Gephardt that he needs to leave in five minutes.

Shortly, time up, Aboussie taps frantically, the signal for "We gotta go."

He's done.

When Joyce Aboussie taps, Gephardt listens.

Aboussie, 36, doesn't hold elective office, but some call her the most influential woman in Missouri politics.

To former Sen. Thomas F. Eagleton, she's "the Ayatollah" of regional politics - and he's not alone.

Joyce Aboussie is political director, adviser and chief fund-raiser for Gephardt, one of the nation's most powerful Democrats.

But she is far more than an aide. When she's in a room, every politician knows she's there. And afterward - in the corner, in the hall or on the phone - her counsel will be sought.

"You know when you talk to Joyce Aboussie, you're talking to Dick Gephardt," said Terry Jones, a local political consultant.

Aboussie also has accumulated a lot of clout in her own right.

Her political polling and telemarketing firm, Telephone Contact Inc., is considered by some - including her - to be the most successful company of its kind in Missouri and possibly the Midwest. In the last 13 months alone, it has taken in over \$500,000 in contracts to help sell voters on various local initiatives.

By meshing various public computer files, Telephone Contact has compiled a detailed data picture - including race, voting frequency and income range - on most households in eastern Missouri.

Some contend that Aboussie's ties to Gephardt give her firm an edge over its competitors because clients may hope to cozy up to Gephardt through her. Her allies counter that her firm succeeds on its own merits.

Aboussie also is a political strategist and confidante to many of Missouri's political players. For example:

When Gov. Mel Carnahan recently ousted the St. Louis Election Board, he asked Aboussie to recommend replacements.

When Jerry Clinton needed rich backers in his effort to bring a professional football team here, he made Aboussie a key contact in his quest for deep pockets.

When Bill Clinton won the Democratic presidential nomination, Aboussie helped pick his campaign team in Missouri and raised lots of money for him.

When the Democratic National Committee set up a panel to select its 1996 convention site, Aboussie was the only Missourian chosen.

St. Louis County Executive George R. "Buzz" Westfall credits Aboussie with rescuing his 1990 campaign when it initially foundered. "She'll be a major part of my re-election campaign this year," he says.

Even a Republican, state Rep. Jim Murphy of Crestwood, whose district lies within that of Gephardt, says: "Part of Gephardt's success is that he's taking advice from Joyce. I wish we had a Joyce Aboussie in the Republican Party."

She's No Mouse

Like any good political aide, Joyce Aboussie knows to blend into the background.

Short, usually wearing a plain dark suit, she stands quietly in a corner while her boss holds court.

Aboussie has helped Richard A. Gephardt, D-St. Louis County, become one of the best money-raisers on Capitol Hill. She also is the gatekeeper for most of his political affairs in Missouri.

Anyone who wants a political appointment or political help calls Aboussie first. Anyone who does anything that could do Gephardt political harm must be prepared to confront Aboussie's wrath.

"I'm tough," she says with a trace of apology.

One measure of her clout could be the reluctance of people to publicly say anything bad about her, with some citing their fear of retribution.

Said one politician: "She'll do anything for Gephardt. And she does nothing without a quid pro quo." In other words, Aboussie expects political favors to be repaid.

The politician asked not to be identified in any way, whether by position, gender or geography.

Aboussie makes sure that Gephardt's political friends get rewarded - with appointments or legislative help, for instance - and she keeps an eye on those she views as his enemies. Although Gephardt has a reputation as "Mr. Congeniality," critics sometimes compare Aboussie to a bulldog or pitbull.

Aboussie has been with Gephardt since he went to Congress in 1976, first as a volunteer, then as an intern. She became part of his paid staff in the late 1970s, and began managing his re-election campaigns in 1982. She's been with him longer than any other key aide.

Aboussie is paid about \$70,000 a year from his campaign budget. She's not on his congressional staff. She estimates that she works 80 hours a week for Gephardt.

She's outspoken and blunt, even with the boss.

A typical exchange - in the car, in the hall, in the office - begins with Aboussie saying, "Dick, we gotta . . ."

Gephardt usually leans over and listens intently - although he sometimes goes on to do just what Aboussie advised against.

Conflicts, including watch-tapping episodes, are quickly resolved with humor. Back in the car, Gephardt sometimes threatens, half in jest, to talk about trade - a real schedule-buster - the next time he spots her tapping her watch.

Her loud, boisterous style is softened with frequent jokes - often about herself - and a hearty laugh anytime anybody says anything remotely humorous. She banters easily with reporters.

Aboussie says she offers Gephardt advice, but he makes all the decisions.

"I always tell him when he was right for not taking my advice - and when he was wrong," she said with a chuckle.

"I've never been accused of being a mouse."

Gephardt calls her "one of a kind." Besides her organizational and fundraising skills, he said, Aboussie knows the district inside out, recalls every action and every position he's ever taken - and makes sure he never forgets his district.

She advises Gephardt on avoiding mine fields. In this year's U.S. Senate race, for example, two candidates - Rep. Alan Wheat of Kansas City and Jackson County Executive Marsha Murphy - have sought Aboussie's advice. Close to both, she will endorse neither in the primary - and neither will Gephardt, she says.

Missouri Democrats still talk about Aboussie's battle to protect Gephardt's turf during the 1990 congressional redistricting. She calls it a cooperative effort with Pearlie Evans, her counterpart for Rep. William L. Clay, D-St. Louis. The loser was former Rep. Joan Kelly

Horn, whose district ended up with the largest share of the area's Republicans.

It was a touchy matter for Aboussie because she and Horn have known each other for years; Horn once worked at Telephone Contact.

Aboussie acknowledges that there were tensions with Horn's staff over redistricting, but says that couldn't be helped:

"I was very protective of Dick Gephardt . . . I had to think about what was important for the majority of the Democrats in the state."

Political consultant Jones, Horn's husband, was his wife's point-person in the redistricting battle. Jones says he has no quarrel over how things turned out - even though Horn subsequently lost her re-election bid to Republican Jim Talent.

Aboussie's firm continues to do work for Jones. And Horn still consults Aboussie about her own political future.

Washington consultants who do business in Missouri say Aboussie has a reputation as one of the state's best political strategists.

"She can play the game with the boys," said consultant Glenn Totten.

"In many states there are key political players, but rarely are they women."

The Firm

Aboussie started Telephone Contact in 1986, a successor to several consulting firms she had set up over the years.

Aboussie and Gephardt say they see no conflict of interest between her job with Gephardt and her firm's work for other clients. Gephardt and Aboussie emphasize that her pay is not financed by the taxpayers; congressional aides are barred by law from engaging in electoral politics on the job.

Like any other political consultant, she is paid out of his campaign fund, which is made up of donations. In effect, Aboussie's fundraising includes getting the money for her own salary.

Gephardt says he never has helped Aboussie get contracts for her firm, and doesn't discuss her business with other politicians.

Said Aboussie: "The success of my firm is dependent on the successes of my firm. I don't throw Dick Gephardt's name around."

Three full-time employees run Telephone Contact, overseeing up to 50 parttime workers, who do the telephoning and polling.

Telephone Contact has extensive computer records on virtually every household in eastern Missouri.

Give Aboussie an address, and chances are her firm's computer can churn out the occupants' demographic profile and any opinions they've volunteered to a Telephone Contact pollster.

Since January 1993, the firm has helped pass measures to build a new jail in St. Louis County and hike the sales taxes in the city of St. Louis.

Telephone Contact also was involved in failed proposals to raise taxes for the Missouri Botanical Garden and the St. Louis Art Museum.

"Our win ratio is three or four to one," Aboussie said.

The firm also does work for Gephardt's re-election campaigns. He has paid Telephone Contact \$137,099 since 1989, his campaign finance reports show.

In 1990, Westfall paid Aboussie's firm about \$92,000 to help him become St. Louis County executive.

Aboussie is rarely at her firm's office, in the basement of a building her family owns on Hampton Avenue.

Instead, she spends most of her time at Gephardt's campaign headquarters in Shrewsbury. Every night at about 9, after she arrives at her townhouse in Sunset Hills, Telephone Contact's supervisors fax her the results of that day's telephone work.

Eagleton and Westfall, among others, say Aboussie's political job with Gephardt gives her firm a visibility that competitors may lack. But Westfall said Aboussie gets business because "she's a winner," not because of her ties to Gephardt.

Even Ed Finkelstein, head of Unicom Inc., a local competitor, says: "If she wasn't capable, she could only live on the congressman's reputation for so long."

Politics In Her Blood

Aboussie comes from a prominent political family here. Her father is Alex Aboussie, a former Democratic committeeman in south St. Louis; her cousin is Alderman Martie Aboussie, D-9th Ward.

She graduated from St. Joseph's Academy and St. Louis University.

"I always wanted to be a political consultant, even in college," she said, laughing. "I know that sounds strange. My family's always been in politics. I've always been intrigued by it. I like politics for all the right reasons. You can change people's lives."

She's ruled out running for office herself. She prefers to change lives from backstage.

The Aboussie family's Lebanese roots led to one of her other key interests. For more than a decade, she's been on the board of St. Jude Children's Hospital in Memphis, Tenn., started 32 years ago by entertainer Danny Thomas, also Lebanese.

"Her family was one of the first to help Danny in the beginning," said Richard Shadyuc, who handles fundraising for the hospital.

As a board member, Shadyuc said, Aboussie has raised a lot of money for the hospital, including a \$150,000 endowment to finance a research fellowship, which she had the hospital name in honor of Gephardt.

When hospital officials said they were concerned about President Bill Clinton's health-care proposals, Shadyuc said Aboussie arranged a conference call between Gephardt and hospital executives.

She says she donates "a substantial portion" of her income to the hospital, but declines to say how much.

Aboussie, who is single, says she tries to have a life outside politics. "I try to make private time for myself. But it's difficult with the pace I lead."

Specialty Is Raising Money

Political activists in both parties say what sets Aboussie apart from most political aides is the meshing of her take-charge personality, her strategist skills, her polling firm - and her talent for raising money.

Aboussie estimates that she raises at least \$750,000 a year for Gephardt, plus an equal amount for other Democrats.

State Democratic party chairman Eugene Bushmann, of Jefferson City, said any politician seeking to raise money in eastern Missouri needs Aboussie's help.

Republican Mack Holekamp, a Webster Groves businessman who tried to knock off Gephardt during the last two elections, contends that Aboussie's money-raising job is a lot easier because Gephardt is so powerful in Washington. Special interest groups want to keep him and other influential incumbents on their side, Holekamp said.

"I don't know what Mr. Holekamp's talking about," replied Aboussie, adding that she doesn't need to use strong-arm tactics.

"I like fundraising. We have good rapport with a large group of Missouri supporters who continue to believe in and support the majority leader."

One fund-raising tool, say some, is her memory. "I've seen her go over an opponent's contribution list and immediately pick out who's also given to Dick," Jones said. "And I'm talking about thousands of contributors."

Her admirers say Aboussie also has a reputation as someone who knows intuitively what the average voter thinks. "She's the most astute politico that I know," said Jackson County's Murphy.

Some of that stems from her firm's polling and telephone banks and the focus groups set up for Gephardt's campaigns. But most of her insight, says Aboussie, comes from simply talking to regular people - at the mall, in the checkout line, on the street.

"If you lose touch at the grassroots level, you've lost touch with everything," she says. "Many times you don't need to listen to what people are saying. Many times you can see it on their face."

Photo By Robert C. Holt Jr./Post-Dispatch - Joyce Aboussie is Rep. Richard A. Gephardt's senior political aide and she also heads a successful political polling and telemarketing firm, Telephone Contact Inc. Some call her the most influential woman in Missouri politics.