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STATE/ROP EDITION

McKenna: The self-made man safeguarding the state Homeland Security chief went from janitor to law student to ace prosecutor

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On Charles McKenna's desk at the state's Homeland Security headquarters is a clock, a gift from a Bronx public school. That's where he mopped the floors while a law student.

Taped to the top of the clock is a visitor pass from his FBI background check almost 20 years ago, when McKenna joined the U.S. Attorney's Office in Newark. That's where he prosecuted criminals and terrorists.

In a sense, McKenna said, the two jobs weren't all that different: "In some way you're cleaning up people's messes, regardless of how you do it."

His new job as director of New Jersey's Department of Homeland Security and Preparedness is to prepare for messes of all kinds, natural and man-made.

"We don't get many chances to be in the spotlight," he said. "But when we are, we have to make sure we don't screw up, because the safety of the people of New Jersey depends on it."

McKenna, 53, aims to consolidate his department, raise its profile and strengthen its working relationship with the State Police. But his role in state government is likely to extend beyond that. McKenna has a close relationship with Gov. Chris Christie, who says he will consult with McKenna on topics beyond security.

"I'll always be bouncing things off Charlie that aren't necessarily in his portfolio," the governor said. "That's because Charlie has a good BS detector."

McKenna grew up in New York in the Astoria section of Queens, playing stickball and football in the streets, and became a janitor after high school.

He eventually decided to go back to school because, "after a couple of years, I realized I had a vocabulary of eight words, and four of them were expletives."

McKenna started taking night classes, then attended St. John's School of Law. During the day he continued working as a school janitor. Back then, that meant more than just cleaning up; it was also McKenna's job to shovel coal into the furnace that heated one school.

At law school, McKenna worried he would stick out because of his working-class roots. "You're not going to measure up and people are going to find you out to be a fraud," he recalls thinking. He said he was put at ease when, on the first day of law school, the student next to him told him he fixed heating and air-conditioning systems.

After receiving his law degree, McKenna joined a Manhattan law firm and left behind janitorial work. "On Friday I had a scraper with bubblegum on it," he said. "On Monday I was in a suit."

METS AND SPRINGSTEEN

McKenna's former boss, *Gideon Cashman*, remembers him as a rising star at the firm but says he encouraged McKenna to take a job offer at the U.S. Attorney's Office in Newark in 1991.

As a prosecutor, McKenna developed the U.S. case against Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, accused of murdering Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl. Pakistani militants had lured Pearl into a trap with an e-mail routed through a South Brunswick server, giving jurisdiction to the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of New Jersey. Sheikh was indicted but not tried -- he has been in a Pakistan jail, facing a death sentence.

Around that time, McKenna recalls, he was unhappy that Christie was taking over as U.S. attorney. He worried Christie was "a political hack, that he was nothing more than a fundraiser."

Soon after Christie moved in, he offered promotions to McKenna and Paula Dow, then a criminal prosecutor. Skeptical, McKenna and Dow discussed it over the weekend.

"I said, if the guy turns out to be a jerk, we can leave. And if he doesn't turn out to be a jerk, we'll have great positions," McKenna said. "He turned out not to be a jerk."

Christie and McKenna, a drummer with slightly shaggy hair, became close, attending Bruce Springsteen concerts and Mets games together.

Christie said: "He's loyal, he's dedicated, he's funny, he's charming. People warm up to Charlie very, very quickly."

When Christie won November's election, both McKenna and Dow followed him into state government, McKenna as Homeland Security director and Dow as attorney general.

McKenna, of Short Hills, is not married but has had a long-term relationship with a woman who lives with her three children in New York.

BROKER AND COORDINATOR

He plans to close one of his department's offices and move another to save money but isn't ready to give up his 18-member investigative team, even though a transition report called it redundant. "The FBI does an incredible job, but they can't do everything," he says.

The \$14 million department serves primarily as a broker, distributing millions of dollars in federal grants for security programs and coordinating between government agencies. That's not always easy in a state with a legacy of home rule, said McKenna's predecessor, Richard CaxF1;as.

"It's a very difficult and complex job," CaxF1;as said. "Maintaining those relationships is key, especially in a state like New Jersey with all of those authorities and municipalities."

McKenna aims to make sure the relationships are "seamless."

"We're the agency that is the glue that is going to stick them all together," he said.

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