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Benefit concert for Headley has polarizing effect



As some rally to support sheriff, others fear cronyism

By *HEATHER DONAHOE*
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Williamson County Sheriff Ricky Headley, who calls himself the "Singing Sheriff," sings the National Anthem at a community event in this photo from 2004. Headley plans to perform with the band Pure Country at the fundraiser to be staged Saturday night but said he had no part in organizing the benefit.

FRANKLIN — Plans for a concert to raise money for Williamson County Sheriff Ricky Headley's legal expenses has reignited resentment and support for the legally embattled lawman.

Some of Headley's closest friends have enlisted the help of several country and bluegrass bands to perform Saturday at the former Alexander Dodge building on North Royal Oaks Boulevard. Headley himself plans to perform with the band Pure Country but said he had no part in organizing the benefit.

Bobby Bennett, one of the event's organizers and a longtime Headley friend, said the concert is a chance to give back to a man who has "done a lot of good" for Williamson County.

"He's made a mistake," Bennett said of Headley. "None of us is perfect. . . . He's raised thousands of dollars for charity and never refused to help people in that situation."

But plenty of people aren't interested in shelling out \$40 for a ticket to help cover the legal expenses of a sheriff facing drug and misconduct charges — a total of 37 criminal charges in Williamson and Davidson counties.

"I flipped out," Franklin resident Tracy Hagan said.

"I cannot believe that, No. 1, he's still in office, and No. 2, . . . to use celebrity connections almost glamorizes the situation," she said. "I'm trying to explain to my 15-year-old why this is wrong."

Headley is charged with four counts of official misconduct in Williamson County, based on allegations that he was in uniform and used a county-owned vehicle to pick up fraudulent prescription drugs at a Nashville pharmacy.

He said money raised will go to his attorney, David Raybin.

More benefits likely

When the benefit concert was initially announced, organizers touted an appearance by country music star George Jones, who has since backed out because of a scheduling conflict. On Tuesday, Jones offered his support.

"Nancy and I wish we could be there for the party," Jones said. "As far as I'm concerned, he's well-loved by so many people in the area regardless of the problems. The thing that worries me about politics is that everybody uses the first bad thing they can against you so they can get rid of you and get their own somebody in there."

Jones alluded to his own personal indiscretions.

"We've all made mistakes. I know I've made mine, and I've fixed them, and that's what the sheriff is trying to do if they would just give him the chance," Jones said. "I don't think he should be brought down to a low level just because he's human."

Headley friend and event organizer Buddy Victory said Saturday's event would likely be the first in a series of similar support rallies for Headley around the county over the next few months.

"I can't cast the first stone, but I can be there for someone who is in trouble or hurting," Victory said.

Support humbles Headley

Williamson County resident Rick Cato said he believes Headley should be paying for his own mistake.

"He's using his connections to bail himself out," Cato said. "Basically, these people are going to raise money to pay this guy's legal bills. What do they get in return if this guy stays sheriff? Basically favoritism. Their kids or they will get pulled over and they'll get out of it. . . . It's wrong. There are people sitting in jail that made mistakes, too. If they had better counsel, maybe they'd be out, too."

Headley said he's humbled by the support he's been shown. He said he runs into people every day who tell him they are praying for him and think he's doing a good job.

"Me and my family have such great friends across the county who have reached out to us, supported us," Headley said. "Folks called me and said, 'We know the kind of person you are.' They know how political this is. Pretty much all this is politics."

Headley said there are political motives behind calls for his ouster but would not elaborate. He has admitted that he became addicted to painkillers while dealing with back pain, but he said he's received treatment for his addiction.

If convicted of any of the 21 felony charges he faces, Headley could be removed from office.

A TIMELINE OF THE RICKY HEADLEY CASE

Jan. 31, 2007: Williamson County Sheriff Ricky Headley is arrested after leaving Brooks Pharmacy in Nashville, where police said he had been illegally obtaining painkillers. Headley was charged with two counts: obtaining scheduled drugs by fraud and obtaining a legend drug by fraud. Investigators said he collected more than 1,900 pills between Oct. 2, 2006, and Jan. 20, 2007.

March 1: Headley returns to work after spending about 30 days in an undisclosed rehabilitation facility.

April 25: Headley says he has no plans to resign as sheriff and will fight the charges against him.

Oct. 8: A Williamson County grand jury indicts Headley on four counts of official misconduct stemming from allegations that he was in uniform and drove a county-owned vehicle to pick up drugs from Brooks Pharmacy.

Oct. 11: Hundreds of Headley supporters hold a rally for the sheriff on the steps of the Williamson County Judicial Center. Supporters call the charges against him "political."

Oct. 12: A Davidson County grand jury indicts Headley on 33 counts related to unlawfully obtaining controlled substances.

Oct. 23-24: Headley enters not guilty pleas in Williamson and Davidson counties.

Oct. 29: Williamson County Commissioner Jeff Ford calls for Headley's resignation. Under state law only the state attorney, county attorney or district attorney can attempt to oust an elected official from office.

Dec. 18: A Franklin-based chapter of the Fraternal Order of Police votes to kick Headley out its organization.

Jan. 2, 2008: Headley's attorney, David Raybin, asks judges in Davidson and Williamson County to combine the charges and have one trial instead of two.

July 14: Headley is scheduled to appear in a Williamson County courtroom to stand trial on four counts of official misconduct. The case has not been set for trial in Davidson County.

— COMPILED BY STAFF WRITER MITCHELL KLINE