



MIKE KITTRELL/Staff Photographer

Fran Viselli stands with what's left of his \$2 million a year business after the Machine launched a boycott when his son,

Joey, tried to seek election to student office at the University of Alabama.

Downfall of business linked to 'Machine'

► Former candidate for student government says his father's pizza business was boycotted

By KEVIN STOKER
Special to the Register

When Joey Viselli ran for president of the University of Alabama Student Government Association, he knew he was going up against a machine that had dominated campus politics for nearly a century.

But he didn't know to what lengths the Machine would go to win the 1989 election.

"They beat up one of my campaign workers," said Viselli, who now lives in Charlotte, N.C. "They called my mother and said lewd, violent and threatening things to her."

The Machine, a secret organization of 27 white fraternities and sororities, also organized a boycott of his father's business, Bama Bino Pizza.

Four years later, Viselli still regrets his campaign for the SGA presidency may have played a part in the demise of his father's business. But he does not regret that the university suspended student elections and the SGA last Monday.

The administration made the decision after Minda Riley, a presidential candidate not backed by the Machine, was beaten up in her home the night of Jan. 31.

Miss Riley opposed the SGA ban, but Viselli said she accomplished the greater good than if she had been elected. After his defeat in the 1989 election, Viselli said various in-

dependent groups filed complaints about alleged corruption at the polls.

However, the appeals to the student government court system proved fruitless, he said. The student courts are appointed by the SGA, which is controlled by the Machine.

"You're running against a candidate hand-picked and groomed to be president," Viselli said. "Usually it's a fairly weak-willed individual. They don't want someone to go against what the Machine wants."

Machine candidates, he said, receive about \$15,000 in campaign funds. This money comes from Machine dues to fraternities, sororities and alumni.

"On the day of the election, I had no idea the Machine dominance was as bad as it was," Viselli said. "They fined members of fraternities and sororities for not voting. They have vans that go to the (fraternity and sorority) houses to take them to the Ferguson Center to vote."

The vans running during Viselli's election had banners with "Boycott Bama Bino Pizza" on them.

"Later, I was a resident assistant at a university dorm," Viselli said. "One of the residents came up to me and said, 'You know, I love Bama Bino Pizza, but I just can't eat it anymore because the house will fine me.'"

His father, Fran Viselli, stresses the boycott was not wholly responsible for the loss of what was once a \$2 million a year business with four stores in Tuscaloosa and Birmingham.

Pizza Hut had entered the delivery business, and Domino's was already there. In the

year after the Machine boycott, however, Bama Bino's receipts dropped \$400,000.

The older Viselli not only lost business from the fraternities and sororities, but also failed to get lucrative student activities sponsored by the Machine-controlled SGA.

"Before the boycott, we worked every Greek Week when they had big pizza parties," the father said. "After the boycott, we could not bid low enough. We only worked student events when they were instituted by Student Life, which is not controlled by the Machine."

Two years after his son ran for president, the older Viselli was asked to provide pizza at an election night concert at Foster Hall on campus.

"I thought maybe we had outlived the people who had boycotted us," he recalled. "Then I got there, set up, stayed for awhile and realized I'd been set up. There was a very low turnout, and I didn't do a lot of business. The victory party was somewhere else. That was the knife in the back."

In 1991, Viselli's father closed his last Bama Bino Pizza store. The only remnants of the business is a truck carrying a full-sized pizza oven for catering events.

"After losing the business," he said, "I lost my heart. I became real depressed. I never really hated them (the Machine). The greatest feeling was loss; I had lost a lot of people that I thought were my friends."

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