

Unprecedented role for Lt. Gov. candidate Kim Guadagno

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She's running for a job that doesn't yet exist -- and one many New Jersey voters deem irrelevant. Kim Guadagno says that's fine by her.

"I don't think this is about me. I really don't," said Guadagno, the running mate for Republican gubernatorial candidate Chris Christie, in an interview between campaign stops last week. "I really do believe it's about Chris. I was selected because my whole career and my whole background is consistent with his message."



Jennifer Brown/The Star-Ledger

Kim Guadagno is Chris Christie's running mate in the first-ever New Jersey governor's race to feature a lieutenant governor. A native of Iowa, Guadagno is a former federal prosecutor whose corruption-fighting credentials add to Christie's. She is also a mother of three boys.

In the first New Jersey governor's race to feature a lieutenant governor post, Guadagno is not playing an attack role like her Democratic counterpart, state Sen. Loretta Weinberg. And while local Democrats and immigration groups have criticized her tenure as Monmouth County sheriff, she has gone mostly ignored by Gov. Jon Corzine's campaign as it takes aim at Christie.

That has left Guadagno to fashion her own role as supporting player -- mostly by mirroring her take-it-or-leave-it boss.

"She's very plain-spoken. She's very direct," Christie said. "We're very similar."

Like Christie, Guadagno -- who has held the sheriff's post for 18 months -- can advertise herself as an outsider to Trenton.

Like Christie, Guadagno is married with young children who will campaign by her side -- and bonded with the Christie clan over a backyard barbecue to make sure they wouldn't clash.

They even make the same gaffes - Guadagno told a Sayreville audience last week she would've been a doctor instead of a lawyer "if I could add or subtract." That echoed Christie's joke that "I went to law school because I couldn't do math or science," which inspired mockery during debates over the budget in the GOP primary.

Most important, Guadagno is a former federal prosecutor who won convictions on political corruption -- the issue that was Christie's calling card as U.S. attorney and has roared back into the governor's race after a recent scandal.

"For her, it reminds people of Chris' main credential," said state Sen. Joseph Kyrillos (R-Monmouth), Christie

campaign chairman and a friend of Guadagno and her husband, Michael, a Superior Court judge. "She fits perfectly with the team."

It all seems a little too smooth for some Democrats, who note Guadagno's introduction on the Asbury Park boardwalk -- complete with applause lines about "two former federal corruption prosecutors" cleaning up Trenton -- came just three days before the arrests of 44 people by the U.S. Attorney's Office.

Guadagno has heard that grumbling, and has a quick comeback. On the morning FBI agents fanned out for the roundup, she said, she was working her way through a list of Republicans to call and introduce herself. On the list was Assemblyman Daniel Van Pelt (R-Ocean), arrested that day and accused of pocketing a \$10,000 bribe.

"If they had leaked information to me, they didn't do a very good job, because I left a cell phone message for Assemblyman Van Pelt that morning," Guadagno said.

Born Kimberly McFadden in Waterloo, Iowa, in 1959, the third of five children, she moved to more than two dozen locales as her father invested in and managed radio stations around the country.

After getting her law degree from American University Law School in 1983, she went to Brooklyn, clerking for judges, working in private practice -- and acquiring a distinctive New York accent.

She got a job with the U.S. Attorney's Office in Brooklyn and thought she would stay in the city until meeting Michael Guadagno, a fellow prosecutor and New Jersey native.

In 1991, they married and moved to Monmouth Beach, a close-knit Shore town of 3,500. Her husband built the house, "board by board, block by block, brick by brick -- his dad was in the block business," Guadagno said. They had three sons and added on to the house, now assessed at \$2.5 million.

She enjoys sailing with family and volunteers with Holiday Express, a nonprofit group that puts on Christmas music shows.

Guadagno joined the Monmouth Beach planning board in 1992, but politics didn't beckon until 2005, when she won a seat as a Monmouth Beach commissioner and helped other GOP campaigns.

She has a relatively short history of past political donations, including the maximum of \$3,400 to Christie during this year's primary. She also made donations in 2001, 2002 and 2003 to former Senate co-president John Bennett (R-Monmouth), who lost re-election to his seat in 2003 after federal authorities that March began probing overcharges billed to Marlboro Township by his law firm. He was publicly cleared by the U.S. Attorney's Office in 2007.

Guadagno had just begun a campaign for an Assembly seat in 2007 when Monmouth County Sheriff Joe Oxley announced his retirement. She went for that job, beating former Belmar Police Chief Jack Hill, a Democrat, in a race that featured nasty accusations over ethics.

On the job

As sheriff, she endeared herself to the rank-and-file, despite a budget struggle with freeholders that resulted in layoffs of 38 corrections officers and 14 law enforcement officers this year.

Guadagno won points by emphasizing law enforcement duties over "public-relations type" work like car-seat demonstrations, said Mike Deroian, a vice president of the New Jersey state PBA and delegate for Local 314, which represents sheriff's officers.

"She was the first one to come here and realize that 'While I may come and go, this is your career,' " Deroian said.

The job hasn't always been smooth. Overtime costs at the sheriff's office went up 40 percent in the first two months after the layoffs. Immigration advocates are angry with her for entering the sheriff's office in a controversial federal program that allows local officers to act as immigration agents.

Guadagno says her version of the program would not round up illegal immigrants for arrest, instead running federal background and immigration checks of those in the Monmouth County jail.

But Rita Dentino, a coordinator at the immigrant advocacy organization Casa Freehold, said Guadagno's policy still chills relations between immigrants and police throughout the county.

"She was using that as part of a stepping stone for moving on to a higher place politically," Dentino said. "It has a human toll."

That program is one of the few key areas where Christie and Guadagno diverge. She is also pro-choice, while Christie opposes abortion rights -- a stance attacked by the Corzine campaign. A "practicing" Catholic, Guadagno says both agree on "the ultimate issue, and that's that there are too many abortions."

Guadagno concedes it's strange auditioning for a job that hasn't existed before. "You're jumping into the unknown," she said. "But knowing Chris and his reputation, I have no doubt."

Guadagno has learned one thing about campaigning with Christie: She'll be listening to lots of Springsteen. Christie is a rabid fan who's been to more than 120 concerts. One night last week, he told his running mate it was time for her to see one.

"I said, 'Chris, you know I'm a country music fan,' " she said.

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