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Tighter immigration law is activist's mission

Robinson's campaign gets help from man who helped form 9-11 group

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Peter Gadiel has never lived in North Carolina but has, on his own dime, flown down from Connecticut three times in the past year and volunteered on two political campaigns.

On Friday afternoon, he headed back to his real estate business outside New York after finishing a round of radio and television interviews in Winston-Salem promoting Republican congressional candidate Vernon Robinson.

Gadiel is on a mission to tighten the nation's laws on illegal immigrants, specifically to keep states from issuing driver's licenses to them. He is wading into battles such as Tuesday's Republican runoff election between Robinson and state Sen. Virginia Foxx, not because of a political philosophy but because of the searing image of the World Trade Center in flames and knowing that his 23-year-old son, Jamie, burned up inside.

"I'm doing this for him," Gadiel said of his volunteer political work, "because if I ever stopped doing it, I would be turning my back on him."

After the Sept. 11 attacks and the grief that followed, Gadiel helped found 9/11 Families For A Secure America. The group, made up of families of about 200 victims, pushes for changes in the government and law that they think will keep future terrorists out of the country, especially tightening border security and the issuing of visas.

Many of the Sept. 11 hijackers held valid driver's licenses they obtained even after their visas were no longer valid.

"Those licenses were the tools they used to get around the country," Gadiel said, "to rent cars, to rent hotel rooms, to open bank accounts."

The 9/11 Families group focused on state legislatures, trying to pass or strengthen laws prohibiting driver's licenses for illegal immigrants. Gadiel, a 56-year-old with glasses and thinning gray hair, headed to Raleigh last year to help state Sen. Fern Shubert, a Union County Republican, with her bill to change North Carolina's driver's license law.

He has traveled to six other states and endured allegations of racism and anti-immigrant bigotry, which he finds odd given that he is the son of a German Jew who fled his homeland one step ahead of the Gestapo.

Gadiel lends an intensity to the immigration issue that shows in his eyes, his voice and the tilt of his body. Shubert's bill failed, but Gadiel came back to help her campaign for governor in June, which also fell short.

"He went all over the state trying to talk to people," Shubert said.

In North Carolina's 5th Congressional District, Robinson caught the attention of 9/11 Families because of his arguments on strictly enforcing immigration law. After news broke last week that police had arrested a Pakistani man illegally in the country who was videotaping Charlotte buildings, a friend of Gadiel's encouraged him to come help Robinson.

The arrest "underlined what they had been talking about," Robinson said, "the link between the failure to enforce immigration policy and national security."

Jeff Namm, a neighbor and 15-year friend of Gadiel's, has encouraged him to run for political office, but Gadiel seems comfortable with the role he has chosen.

"If Jamie's death is to make any sense," Namm said, "it is for him to help make sure this never happens again."

Runoff Elections

North Carolina holds runoff elections Tuesday. Big races to watch: Republican races in the 5th and 10th Congressional Districts and the Democratic runoff for superintendent of public instruction. Polls open 6:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m.

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