

The Daily Herald

Villa Park woman fights illegal gambling

March 18, 2012

By [Burt Constable](#)

As many suburbanites wade through their NCAA basketball bracket paperwork to see if anybody in their office pool has Norfolk State or Lehigh making the Sweet Sixteen tonight, Kathy Gilroy of Villa Park boasts her own mounds of paperwork.

The 62-year-old anti-gambling watchdog's collection of zippered bags holds handwritten notes, legal decisions, email correspondence with public officials, faxes, newspaper articles, court transcripts, the Illinois criminal code from 1961, the latest legislation on video poker machines, and myriad copies of local ordinances, and state and federal laws spanning more than 20 years.

"I kind of consider myself an expert," Gilroy says. She also doesn't see anything cute in that story about the 11-year-old story Omaha, Neb. boy busted for running an NCAA tourney pool at his elementary school.

A native of Lost Nation, Iowa, where a park is named in honor of her relatives, Gilroy began her crusade against illegal gambling before the first Midwest riverboat casino opened in 1991 in Davenport, Iowa.

"I just knew it was Pandora's box. I just knew it was going to be bad news," Gilroy says. She tells of a farmer who gambled away the family farm, another who ended up broke because he gambled away all the profits after selling a truckload of hogs, and a childhood friend who threw away a marriage and tens of thousands of dollars chasing a gambling addiction.

Gilroy, an insurance agent who calls her watchdog duties "my second job," devotes much of her energy to cracking down on charities that don't follow the gambling rules in an environment where the lines often seem blurred.

"Is it charitable gambling, or is it gambling that is using, or abusing, a charity?" she asks.

Some critics dismiss her as a busybody, a quixotic character flailing at windmills. She's seen her letters to politicians tacked up on bulletin boards identifying her as "our gambling pest." A public official once told her to "Get a (expletive) life!" Gilroy says.

But she's knocked down a few of those windmills she's attacked. A volunteer with stoppredatorygambling.org, her crowning achievement might be from her work to stop kids from gambling.

“In 2000, all four Naperville high schools were sponsoring casino nights, and I got them shut down,” Gilroy says.

The watchdog also sank her teeth in high-profile raffles sponsored by Chicago Bears Hall-of-Famers Walter Payton and Richard Dent, resulting in a law being changed. She shut down a fundraiser hosted by the grieving parents of a murder victim, and put the brakes on a motorcycle club's raffle to raise money to send burn victims to a camp. She's working now with legislators trying to crack down on charity raffles that use the Internet, phone and U.S. mail.

Ignoring violations of gambling laws simply because the proceeds go to a good cause is the same as ignoring an armed robber who is using his ill-gotten gains to feed his hungry children, Gilroy argues.

At a meeting of the Illinois Gaming Board, which oversees casino gambling and video poker, Gilroy sits near the front and takes notes. When the board fines the new Rivers Casino in Des Plaines \$25,000 after the casino revealed it violated rules by granting membership cards to seven problem gamblers on the state's self-exclusion program list and gave cash advances to two gamblers who should have been barred from entering, Gilroy rolls her eyes. “I wonder how much money they lost at that casino,” she says of the problem gamblers.

State gambling regulators know Gilroy.

“I just wanted you to know you weren't trying my patience,” says a smiling Mark Ostrowski, administrator of the gaming staff, who seeks out Gilroy after the meeting to discuss some of their recent email correspondence.

“I think it's good that they (Gilroy and other watchdogs) are out there keeping the regulators and the industries on their toes,” says Gene O'Shea, director of the self-exclusion program and a spokesman for the gaming board.

One of the frustrations facing Gilroy is that “there isn't one kind of gambling,” says Sue Hofer, a spokeswoman for the Illinois Department of Revenue, which has a division that regulates charitable gaming. The complicated tax rules for a charity that hosts a gambling event are different from those governing a “Sweet 16” birthday bash in a private home. The state lottery, the casinos and video poker, the race tracks, charity raffles and casino nights all fall under the jurisdiction of different regulating bodies with different rules, and deciding which agency has jurisdiction is tricky.

Gilroy says complaints often bounce from agency to agency and many times end up with local police. Generally not spending the effort to investigate her complaint, police often tell her to contact the local state's attorney or even the FBI, she adds.

“Why should I have to do all the work?” she says. “Don't they have people who are supposed to investigate that stuff?”

Her complaint about one suburban charity event was dismissed by a police department that has two officers helping to run the event, notes Gilroy, who did manage to get a poster advertising the event removed from the police department window.

She says many of the machines in kids' arcades are basically roulette wheels and slot machines. Her rage against those machines often falls on deaf ears. She's ticked that a company with mob ties was denied a license for video gambling devices in Illinois but still can put games of chance in kid arcades. It bothers her that older people can't qualify for assistance if they give away all their savings to their kids, but can qualify if they lose it all at a casino.

“My main problem with all of this is the home parties and the underage gambling,” Gilroy says.

If senior citizens who grew up in an era when gambling was considered an evil racket run by the mob can become gambling addicts, today's children might be even more susceptible, Gilroy figures.

“I worry,” Gilroy says. “They are growing up in a culture that accepts it.”

Gamble: Gilroy saw childhood friend lose everything to gambling addiction