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Former Judge Rory Bellantoni to challenge Janet DiFiore for Westchester District Attorney

By Jonathan Bandler

A former Westchester judge known for several controversial rulings said today he is planning to challenge incumbent Janet DiFiore next year in the race for Westchester County District Attorney.

Rory Bellantoni, a 43-year-old Republican from Yorktown, said he has had preliminary conversations with Republican, Conservative and Independence party leaders and expects to form a campaign committee in the near future.

If I got an absolute "No" at any point I would have stopped but that hasn't happened," he said. Obviously its a difficult challenge but I wouldn't be doing it if I didn't think I had a chance."

DiFiore, 56, of Bronxville, was a longtime Republican who became a Democrat in 2007. She is expected to seek a third term next November but has made no formal announcement. She was a county judge and a state Supreme Court justice for seven years before running successfully for the county's top law enforcement post in 2005.

She is currently president of the District Attorneys Association of the State of New York and is chairperson of the new state Joint Committee on Public Ethics.

But she has come under fire in recent months amid reports of an investigation by the county Department of Social Services into how her longtime nanny received unemployment benefits, and questions have surfaced over the woman's immigration status over the years that she worked for DiFiore and her husband.

The DA has also been criticized by many for her office's failure to get indictments in the fatal shootings of three black men by police in recent years.

Bellantoni suggested she is vulnerable for those reasons, as well as her failure to pursue any meaningful corruption cases during her tenure and for her political connections to former state Sen. Nicholas Spano and disgraced lawyer Anthony Mangone. Spano went to federal prison last week for tax evasion. Mangone is awaiting sentencing for tax evasion and bribery.

"I miss public service," he said. And I see a lot of problems, and questions about ethical lapses, at the top of that office."

Lucian Chalfen, a spokesman for DiFiore, declined comment on Bellantoni's criticism and his candidacy.

DiFiore was one of the top vote-getters when she ran as a Republican, and her party switch gave her the backing of the Democrats' significant advantage among registered voters in the county.

Bellantoni was the youngest judge in Westchester when he was elected as a county court judge in 2003 at the age of 34. He lost a bid for state Supreme Court justice four years later. His father, Orazio,

has been a state Supreme Court justice in Westchester for 17 years.

As a judge, Rory Bellantoni made several controversial rulings, some of which were subsequently reversed by appellate courts. The most significant one was in September 2008 when he overturned the murder conviction of DiGuglielmo, the off-duty New York City police officer who fatally shot Charles Campbell in 1996 in the parking lot of his family's Dobbs Ferry delicatessen.

DiGuglielmo was free for nearly two years before an appellate court reinstated the conviction and he had to return to prison to resume his 20-years-to-life sentence.

Bellantoni left the bench in May 2009.
