

## Sembler's passion edges toward politics

[SOUTH PINELLAS Edition]

St. Petersburg Times - St. Petersburg, Fla.

Author: KYLE PARKS

Date: Aug 10, 1998

Start Page: 11

Section: BUSINESS

Text Word Count: 947

---

### Document Text

---

Final edited version not provided for electronic library.  
Please see microfilm.

Walking into Mel Sembler's office, the first thing you notice is the photos. Mel with George Bush. With Newt Gingrich. With Ronald Reagan.

"With our best wishes and appreciation," reads a scribbled note from Ronald and Nancy Reagan.

The appreciation is for Sembler's longstanding role as one of the nation's top Republican Party fund-raisers. It has earned him a spot in the highest circles of national politics and an ambassadorship to Australia in 1989-93.

Now, Sembler is chairman of the Republican Party's national finance committee. His goal: to raise \$61-million in this election cycle, which ends in November. He is more than \$47-million of the way there.

He spends only about 10 percent of his time dealing with matters at the Sembler Co., where he is chairman. The rest of the time, he's finding big-ticket donors and dealing with other party matters.

By all accounts, the company is doing well with only occasional input from its founder. It is being run by Craig Sher, the CEO, and two of Mel's sons, vice chairmen Greg and Brent. A third son, Steve, left the company 10 years ago to start his own business.

Sher, 46, took over day-to-day operations 10 years ago as Mel Sembler, after a year as chairman of the International Council of Shopping Centers, started spending more time on politics. "I had a meeting and asked my sons who wanted to run the company, and they pointed to Craig," Sembler said. "Craig agreed and said he'd run it until one of the sons wants to run it."

Everyone still seems happy with the arrangement. Greg Sembler, 37, handles leasing, and Brent Sembler, 41, is heavily involved in the development end.

"Mel is always available, and he's obviously a great resource for us," said Sher, a Democrat who has behind his desk a signed photo of Gingrich, presented by Sembler as a gag gift. "I think he will be chairman of this company forever, because he still loves it."

Sembler first jumped into politics in the '70s as part of a crusade against drugs.

After finding out that one of their sons was smoking pot, Mel and his wife, Betty, founded a non-profit drug rehabilitation program called Straight Inc., which sometimes used methods like sleep deprivation and the withholding of food.

The program got noticed around the country. Sembler says he and his wife urged Nancy Reagan to get involved in the war against drugs, leading to her famed "Just Say No" campaign.

But state auditors criticized Straight Inc.'s tough practices, and by the early '90s it was losing money because of dwindling enrollment. Sembler decided to shut down the program in 1993.

A state audit of the Straight program implied that Sembler may have pressured state officials to renew its operating license in 1989 despite staff objections. He has denied the allegations.

"I don't think any of these people ever had a kid on drugs," he said of his critics. "I developed a thick skin through all

that."

That thick skin has come in handy. Before he was appointed ambassador to Australia by longtime friend George Bush, word got out that under "languages spoken" on his State Department application, Sembler had listed "English (fluent)." He was the butt of jokes, fueling controversy over the practice of picking fund-raisers as ambassadors.

Doonesbury's Garry Trudeau chimed in, depicting an auction where Sembler put in the winning bid for the Australia job.

Still, Sembler earned high marks for his performance as ambassador; several Australian media reports said he was one of the best ambassadors ever from the United States. Many of the 72 employees at the Sembler Co. still refer to him as "Ambassador Sembler."

Now, his goal is to raise millions to help get the Republicans back into the White House. "I look at it as a way to give back to my party," he said. "We have to keep up with one of the great fund-raisers of all time, Bill Clinton. He's like a vacuum cleaner."

In his first year on the job, Sembler raised \$47-million, wiping out a \$10-million debt carried over from the 1996 presidential election. Of the \$47-million, he said, \$17-million came from major donors whose average donation was \$1,700. Another \$30-million was from smaller donors with average gifts of \$30.

Sembler is still involved in the big decisions at his company, which traditionally has an informal board meeting every two weeks at Gigi's Italian Restaurant in South Pasadena.

"Everything has always been decided unanimously," Greg Sembler said.

The family appears extremely close. When the sons were younger, the family went on many business trips together. Friends in the shopping center industry called it "The Sembler Family Traveling Circus."

And Mel would often take his sons along when he worked on deals. "I remember sitting on the doorstep listening to him negotiate a shopping center lease in Inverness when I was 12 years old," Greg Sembler said.

All three sons - and 11 grandchildren - live in the western part of Pinellas County, close to their parents' Treasure Island home. The house, which had an assessed value of \$328,800 last year, is a sprawling residence on one of the island's waterways.

Sembler's home isn't flashy, and neither is his company. Both reflect an understated sort of success.

"Mel has always done small-town and neighborhood centers, but he's done them with a touch of class," said John Riordan, president of the 36,000-member International Council of Shopping Centers. "And that carries over to him, too. He's always been distinctive in how he does things, whether it's how he dresses or how he does business."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

---

**Abstract** (Document Summary)

---

Walking into Mel Sembler's office, the first thing you notice is the photos. Mel with George Bush. With Newt Gingrich. With Ronald Reagan.

[Craig] Sher, 46, took over day-to-day operations 10 years ago as Mel Sembler, after a year as chairman of the International Council of Shopping Centers, started spending more time on politics. "I had a meeting and asked my sons who wanted to run the company, and they pointed to Craig [Sher]," Sembler said. "Craig agreed and said he'd run it until one of the sons wants to run it."

"Mel is always available, and he's obviously a great resource for us," said Sher, a Democrat who has behind his desk a signed photo of Gingrich, presented by Sembler as a gag gift. "I think he will be chairman of this company forever, because he still loves it."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.