Rich Man, Bad Yacht

By GAIL COLLINS

MIAMI

“I started with absolutely nothing and I have lived the American dream,” Jeff Greene, a Senate candidate and billionaire, told a small crowd in one of Miami’s poorest and most crime-ridden neighborhoods this week.

It was not entirely clear how the cheering audience found this information.

But Greene kept repeating it. Like almost all the really, really rich people running for office this year, he regards his story as the core of his campaign. His policy message (jobs, jobs, jobs) and his prescriptions for the American economy (education, infrastructure repair, home weatherization) are pretty much what the Democrats have been pushing in Washington for the last two years.

But Barack Obama doesn’t have a $24 million house and a 145-foot yacht.

“I’m a regular middle-class kid who achieved the American dream,” Greene reminded his listeners.

Greene popped up out of nowhere earlier this year, prepared to “spend what it takes” to grab the Democratic nomination in the U.S. Senate race in Florida to go to Washington and do for America what he has done for his bank account.

Once again, voters are being asked to decide whether the cure for their problems lies in a person who is long on money and short on listening skills. After Greene talked about jobs, jobs, jobs, an unemployed landscaper came up and asked what he would do about the horrific crime rate in the neighborhood.

“Crime is directly related to jobs,” said Greene.

A woman with respiratory problems wanted to know about housing.
“Jobs, housing — these are basic needs.”

Being the rich candidate is not without its burdens. For one, there’s the matter of that yacht, the Summerwind. Greene might see himself as an upstanding family man, but his yacht is bad, bad, bad. It’s an embarrassing, headline-making connection — the Levi Johnston of boats.

The government of Belize says Summerwind tore up a part of a national coral reef with its anchor, but Greene denies knowing anything about it. The yacht went to Cuba, apparently breaking the American embargo. Greene says that was just for emergency repairs, and, anyway, he spent the downtime visiting Cuban synagogues.

Former employees keep telling reporters about wild parties. There are claims that one involved “naked drunken people everywhere.” Greene says these are fantasies cooked up by disgruntled former workers, or reporters trying to blame him for the lifestyle of some of the yacht’s “colorful guests.”

Clearly, the Summerwind has a life of its own, cruising around the globe, burning 50 gallons of fuel an hour, throwing orgies for B-list celebrities while Greene is home reading. It played host to Lindsay Lohan, who Greene claims he’s barely met. It took Mike Tyson on a Black Sea cruise that culminated in a drug-and-sex romp in Amsterdam, but Greene was only around for the part where they visited an 11th-century monastery in Ukraine.

Florida’s primary is Tuesday, and Greene is engaged in mortal combat with Kendrick Meek, a four-term congressman. Greene (white, wealthy) insists Meek (black, yachtless) is the insider in the race, and he does have a point. Meek’s House seat was basically deeded to him by his mother, former Representative Carrie Meek. At a rally in Miami this week, Carrie reminded the audience that her son had been a highway patrolman — “out there on the dangerous streets” — without mentioning that he had spent the bulk of his time in uniform working for the governor’s security detail.

Meek seems to be getting by with a lot of help from his friends. Bill Clinton was the star attraction at his rally, and the former president assured the crowd that they would never be disappointed in Kendrick “because he’ll grow every day.” (Clinton specializes in this kind of mini-compliment. On the subject of Barack Obama, Clinton said: “This is my professional opinion. I believe he has done a much better job than he gets credit for.”)

So Meek’s candidacy is all about connections, while Greene’s is all about money. Their policies are pretty similar, so the whole fight has devolved into character assassination. This week when Greene held a “block party” in Meek’s Liberty City district, he referred to the
congressman dismissively as “a perfectly nice fellow.” This was quite a step up from his most recent TV ads. (“Kendrick Meek: Corrupt.”)

Greene has promised that if he wins, he'll give his Senate salary to Florida charities, and many of the most ardent supporters at the event seemed to be hoping to get on that list. Others were lured in with a barbecue, a face painter for the kids and some bands. The theme was to collect canned goods for the hungry, but Greene bought all the cans.

He learns his fate on Tuesday. For Summerwind, I’m thinking the future involves a trip to rehab. Then maybe a reality show for Yachts Gone Wild.

Nicholas D. Kristof is off today.