

# Running with Scissors



## Can anchor-turned-pol Deborah Gianoulis use education against one of the state's most entrenched lawmakers? By Julie Delegal

**F**lorida is a state where hugs make headlines. Governor Charlie Crist's televised man-hug of President Barack Obama still circulates on the Internet, as does state Sen. John Thrasher's open half-hug of indicted former GOP head Jim Greer. But there is another hug, one not witnessed by TV cameras, that is perhaps more revealing of the current political landscape. It occurred in March, between Deborah Gianoulis and Sen. John Thrasher in Thrasher's Tallahassee office. Gianoulis was there to discuss Senate Bill 6, Thrasher's furiously received and ultimately unsuccessful education bill, vetoed by Crist. Gianoulis and Thrasher hugged, exchanged pleasantries and appeared genuinely happy to see one another before sitting down to a civil, if truly divided, debate about the teacher performance pay bill.

What a difference a few months can make. On June 15,

former WJXT anchor Gianoulis formally entered the race, challenging Thrasher in what is sure to be one of the state's most high profile and well-funded contests. Her decision to challenge the longtime lobbyist and politician grew out of her anger over SB 6, a stealth bill introduced without input from teachers or school boards, and which many educators viewed as alienating. Gianoulis has worked for education nonprofits since her retirement from television six years ago, most recently for Save Duval Schools, a group that organized rallies in which participants dressed in vibrant yellow T-shirts and demanded better education funding.

But her decision to take aim at one of the state's most powerful Republicans means she won't be able to run a single-issue campaign. Thrasher, who has served in the legislature off and on since 1992, and who as chair of the state GOP controls

his party's purse strings, is a formidable foe in any race. He's a particularly tough opponent in Senate District 8, some of the reddest territory in the state.

Gianoulis, a Democrat without any prior elective experience, has her work cut out for her. If she were anyone else, in fact, the contest might be considered mere political theater. But Gianoulis comes to the race with some real assets. Not only does she enjoy near-universal name recognition in Northeast Florida from her years holding down the Channel 4 anchor desk, but she's maintained the best aspects of any TV talking head's rep, and is generally viewed as benevolent, objective and concerned.

That's not to say party politics don't matter in the race. Gianoulis is already trying hard to align herself with moderate Republicans, comparing herself ideologically to GOP stalwart

Jim King. She may never get the party's deep loyalists to switch, but Gianoulis appears determined to offer herself as a post-partisan candidate, one who transcends petty labels and appeals to a grassroots majority. And she insists that the goal of overcoming party divisions is anything but quixotic.

"The idea that we will live in eternal conflict is so cynical," she says. "We need to hear each other and to come up with workable solutions. And I think we have the ability to do that."

## WHAT CHANGED?

When you work with Deborah Gianoulis, as I have, you notice that calls get returned a little more quickly; doors open a little faster. Rallies involving hundreds of yellow-clad people materialize with only two days' notice.

Part of her power is sheer name recognition. Gianoulis worked at Jacksonville's WJXT for two decades, half of the longest-running local anchor team in the country when she left in 2003. People from all walks of life remember her as a peppy, positive television personality. Movers and shakers remember her as a journalist who did her homework.

Having disappeared from the limelight for several years, Gianoulis moved from the quieter world of nonprofit board service back to her comfort zone — in front of the cameras — when she became spokesperson for Save Duval Schools in 2009. Initially, when education advocates asked her about running for public office, she'd reply that her calling was in boardrooms, not Tallahassee. As recently as May, she dismissed the possibility of mounting a challenge to Thrasher, saying she just didn't think it's was possible to win in Senate District 8. But by early June, Gianoulis had made the decision to run.

What changed? Her media consultant, John Daigle, is as tight-lipped about the campaign's preliminary polling data as he is about its finances to date. But the experienced political consultant, who is also running campaigns for three Republicans and one nonpartisan judicial candidate this season, says he wouldn't be working with Gianoulis if he didn't think she could win.

Gianoulis had this to say about her change of heart: "I think there's a broad base of support for a fresh voice — for someone who's spent more than 20 years listening to people, in this district, for a living. That's what I did; that's why I'm running."

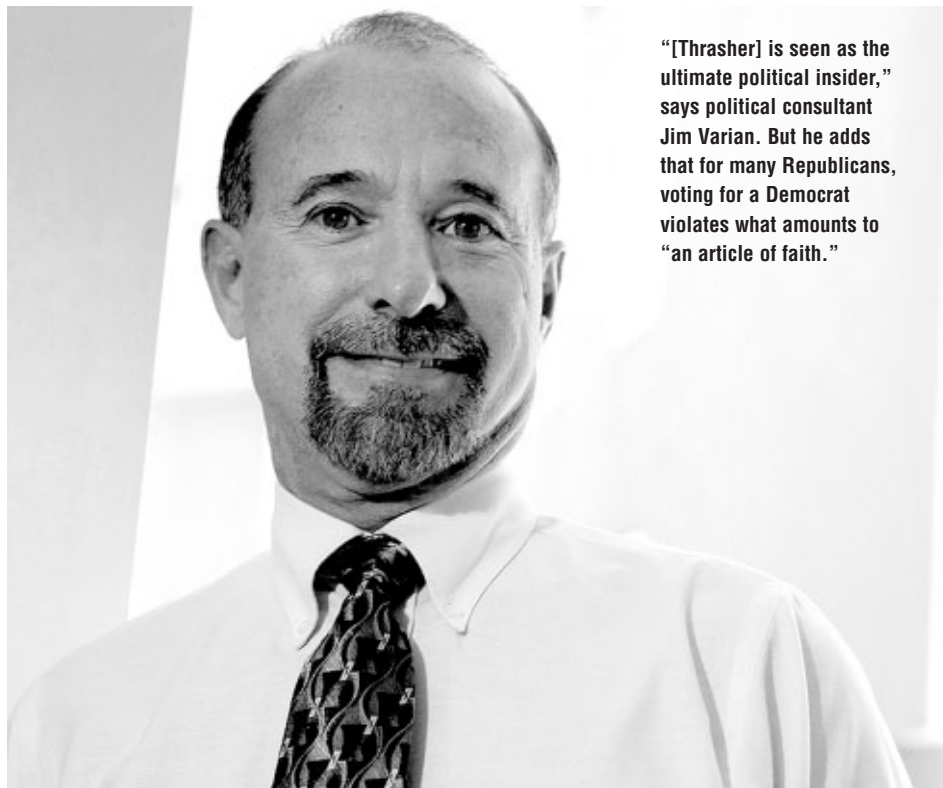
But longtime Jacksonville political consultant Jim Varian agrees with Gianoulis' earlier political assessment: He does not believe a Democrat can defeat Thrasher. "[T]he opportunity to defeat him is in the Republican primary," says Varian, who represents Thrasher's primary opponent Dr. Charles Perniciaro, a former Democrat who switched parties to challenge Thrasher. "And the polling data demonstrates that's true."

Perniciaro (pronounced PerniSHARo.) an Atlantic Beach dermatologist, was also motivated to run by SB 6, which tied teacher pay to student performance on high-stakes tests. Democratic activist and teacher union leader Terrie Brady says Perniciaro felt so strongly about the bill, "the doctor changed parties" in order to run.

## SHIFTING POLITICAL SANDS?

Senate District 8 was redrawn after the 2000 census, with a very deliberate aim: carving more Democratic voters into Sen. Tony Hill's District 1, while carving those same Democrats out of what would become a stronghold for Republicans. "It was purposeful," Varian says of the coastal district's redraw by the Republican legislature.

While the boundaries of the district



**"[Thrasher] is seen as the ultimate political insider," says political consultant Jim Varian. But he adds that for many Republicans, voting for a Democrat violates what amounts to "an article of faith."**

solidified the GOP's position, Gianoulis believes that party allegiance has diminished in recent years. "A lot has happened ... in this district since it was drawn," she says. "No. 1 is destructive partisan politics — and I think people are sick of it. I've heard legislators and lobbyists say this was the worst [legislative] session they have ever endured, and no one wants to go through that again."

Varian doesn't necessarily dispute that, but says the numbers don't lie. "Democrats' tendency to vote Republican is pronounced in Senate District 8," he says. He cites John McCain's decisive defeat of Pres. Obama in that district in 2008, even as Obama won typically

## FORMER CO-ANCHOR TOM WILLS SAYS HE'S BEEN SURPRISED TO SEE HIS FORMER COLLEAGUE MOVE INTO THE POLITICAL ARENA. "YOU'D THINK A JOURNALIST WOULD KNOW BETTER," HE SAYS, ONLY HALF-JOKING.

red Florida, and took nearly half the votes in fervently red Duval County. Today, says Varian, District 8 has 155,751 registered Republicans, 110,390 Democrats, and 77,401 "others." "That relationship [of numbers] is pretty daunting for a Democratic candidate," observes Varian.

Daigle agrees that a party-line vote won't get his client elected. "To win, she's got to get moderate Republicans, Tea Partiers, independent folks and those who are turned off by Thrasher," Daigle says.

That last category is growing. Varian cites a poll showing that Floridians approved Governor Crist's veto of Thrasher's SB 6 by a two-to-one margin. The perception of the bill among voters, says Varian, is one of backroom deals cut by political insiders.

"[Thrasher] really is seen as the ultimate political insider," Varian says. But he adds that for many Republicans, voting for a Democrat violates what amounts to "an article of faith."

Gianoulis strongly disagrees. "I think people are sick and tired of [party] labels," she says. "People at my church come up and tell me they've never voted for a Democrat before, or 'You'll only be the second Democrat I've ever

voted for.' But they know me. They know I'm fair-minded."

## "IT CAN BE MEAN; IT CAN BE UGLY."

Whatever chance Gianoulis stands in District 8 depends on this sense of voter familiarity. According to Matt Corrigan, veteran Jacksonville political observer and political science professor at the University of North Florida, "She has a unique credential — the name recognition." Though Corrigan cautions that he hasn't seen any actual polling data, he says, "I imagine [she has] very rare positives." But Corrigan questions whether Gianoulis will be able to maintain her sterling image during the "nitty-gritty" of the campaign. That stage, he says, may necessitate bringing up the details of Thrasher's signed contract with former state Republican Party chair Jim Greer, which promised Greer \$123,000 in severance to quietly step down. Greer, who as party head was criticized for his lavish spending, was subsequently arrested in June for fraud, grand theft and money laundering of Republican Party funds.

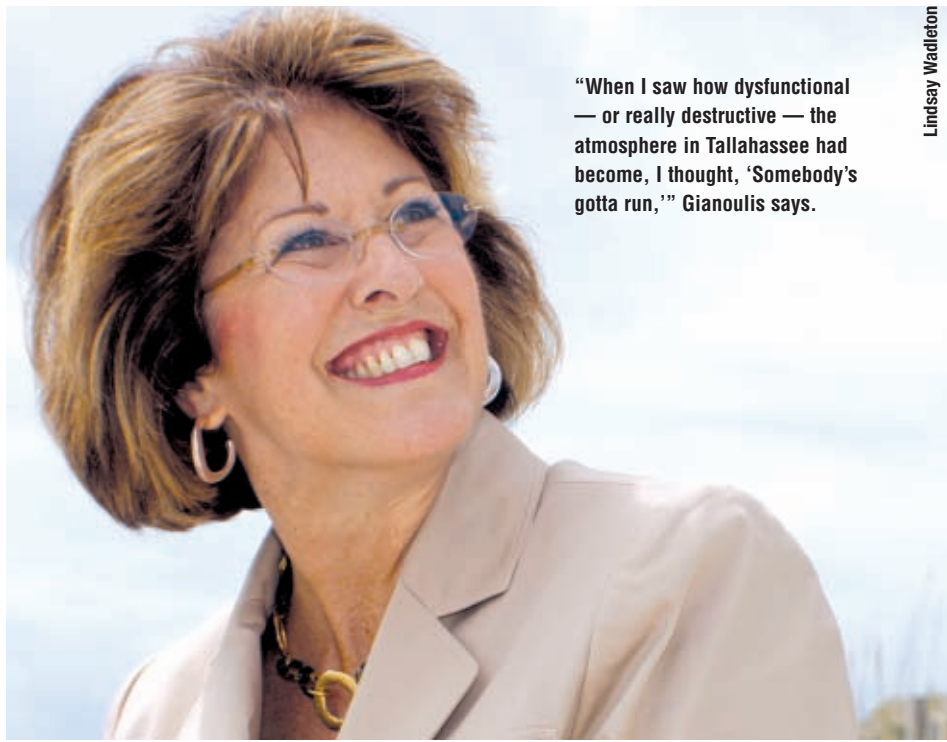
People who have worked closely with Gianoulis over the years doubt she will employ a negative campaign strategy. Terrie Brady, who worked with Gianoulis on the board of the Schultz Center for Teaching and Leadership, says, "[Gianoulis] doesn't want to play politics with our children's lives, with our families' lives." Brady notes that since Gianoulis retired from broadcasting, she's been volunteering full-time for nonprofits, using her skills to speak for "the silent ones." "That says a lot about who she is. She's got the highest level of commitment and integrity," says Brady.

Gianoulis' longtime co-anchor, Tom Wills, echoes Brady's sentiments. Wills, who emphasized he was speaking only as Gianoulis' friend, and not as the newsman who will have to remain impartial as he proceeds to cover the race in District 8, says he has seen an evolution in Gianoulis. Though he says he always knew her retirement "was never going to be a rocking chair," he's been surprised to see his former colleague move into the political arena.

"You'd think a journalist would know better," he says, only half-joking. "We've had a front row seat [to the political arena]. It can be mean; it can be ugly; but thank God for the people who do it."

The two have shared a regular coffee date since Gianoulis retired, and Wills says that his

# Running with Scissors



**“When I saw how dysfunctional — or really destructive — the atmosphere in Tallahassee had become, I thought, ‘Somebody’s gotta run,’”** Gianoulis says.

Lindsay Wadleton

former coworker continually questions how she can best serve her community. She went to work for the boards of directors for Episcopal Children’s Services, United Way, OneJax, Ronald McDonald House, Communities in Schools and the Schultz Center. But this past year, as she worked passionately for Save Duval Schools, he saw a transformation.

“She has the political bug,” Wills says.

## **“YOUR WHOLE LIFE HAS PREPARED YOU FOR THIS.”**

Gianoulis admits that while considering her run, she and her family talked about the idea that they could be attacked. But she and her husband of nearly 32 years, David Heald, concluded they’d not only been good citizens, they’d raised good citizens. Gianoulis credits her adult children, Laura and John Heald, with tipping her decision in favor of running. John, who recently finished a four-and-a-half-year commission with the U.S. Marine Corps, is calling the campaign “Mom’s deployment.” Laura, who is a contract photographer with Sports Illustrated, told Gianoulis, “Mom, it’s like your whole life has prepared you for this.”

Listening to people, connecting lives to issues and synthesizing different voices into solutions are skills that helped Gianoulis win two TV Emmys for military and education reporting. She also earned the prestigious Peabody Award for her reporting on the issue of domestic violence.

But Gianoulis points to yet another reporting experience as the metaphor for the connectedness and relationship-building that Tallahassee needs: living aboard the USS Saratoga for a week. “We didn’t just focus on the deck,” she said of their coverage of the aircraft carrier. “We went into the boiler room, into the kitchen; we talked to the firefighters and to the squadron repair guys who patched holes in tires.”

This kind of thinking, Gianoulis says, is necessary in — but too often absent from — the political arena. “When I saw how dysfunctional — or really destructive — the atmosphere in Tallahassee had become, I thought, ‘Somebody’s gotta run,’” she says. “We’ve got to speak to the people who do the work, with boots on the ground; we’ve got to speak to university people

who are ahead of the curve who know what current research shows us, what technology shows us.” Such changes won’t come easily, however. “I think it’s going to take some time to build trust,” she says, “because so much trust has been destroyed in the partisanship in the last decade.”

It’s a trust that even neighbors are wary of sharing. Gianoulis told Folio Weekly about a July 4 event at her condominium complex in Ponte Vedra Beach, where her neighbors include environmentalists, Tea Partiers, Obama supporters and physicians who hate health care reform. She said one of the Tea Party supporters was hesitant to talk to her about politics at the neighborhood event.

“It’s groups like this where we *need* to talk about politics,” Gianoulis observes, adding that her neighbor will still be her friend whether or not he votes for her.

That kind of mutual respect is the hallmark of Gianoulis’ professional interaction, says Barbara Langley, president and CEO of the Schultz Center for Teaching and Leadership. Langley, who does not endorse any candidate for public office, spoke of Gianoulis from her perspective as a fellow public education advocate.

“Deb knows all the numbers,” Langley says, referring to the percentage of children in poverty in Jacksonville, the number of children lacking readiness skills for kindergarten and the dropout rate, among others. “She does her research before she sets her own opinion.” Langley adds, “She does listen. You can see the wheels turning.”

“I’ve seen her cock her head, give you the opportunity to say your piece and come right back,” Langley explains. “[And] because she is such a lady, and because she is such a very classy lady, she can take the most contentious situation and respond in such a strong, intelligent, insightful way ... that it would make *anyone* step back and listen to what she’s saying.”

“Anyone” includes her likely Republican opponent, John Thrasher. The senator’s spokesperson, Sarah

Bascom, said Thrasher would decline to be interviewed unless Folio Weekly also planned to write a profile article on him. When we explained that we could not guarantee coverage, Bascom said she’d ask him again and call us back prior to deadline. We never heard back.

## **A PENT-UP DEMAND TO BE HEARD**

Gianoulis insists that she’s “the person who’s going to listen to the interests of the people, and not special interests” and that she will “bring everyone to the table” prior to making important policy decisions. But that presents a challenge to journalists who might prefer lists of unequivocal position statements on issues like offshore drilling or illegal immigration. Gianoulis wants to keep Florida’s beaches pristine, she says. And, as a third-generation Greek-American whose grandparents gave up their children for four years in order to work in this country, she says we must find a way to make immigration work for us. But she always adds the proviso, “We need to hear from all parties.”

Gianoulis was among the hundreds of decidedly *unheard* parties who traveled to a day-long Tallahassee committee meeting to talk about public education. Gianoulis’ group, Save Duval Schools, joined forces with 50th No More, a St. Johns County group focused on improving the state’s lackluster commitment to school funding. While coastal St. Johns County, with its exceptional public schools, seems an odd place to foment an education reform movement, Corrigan observes, Thrasher’s failure to consult local voters and officials there proved a powerful inducement.

“Senate Bill 6 clearly triggered a much bigger reaction than anyone ever would have expected,” Varian agrees, but adds that even after the dustup, “it’s not the most important issue to most voters.” Jobs are.

Daigle concedes the point, but observes they are hardly separate issues. “You can talk about economic development all you want, but unless you’re talking about education, you can’t develop the economy.”

Gianoulis says that the percentage of college-educated adults, about 25 percent, hasn’t changed in Northeast Florida since she moved



Walter Coker

**Thrasher, who has served in the legislature off and on since 1992, and who as chair of the state GOP controls his party’s purse strings, is a formidable foe in any race. He’s a particularly tough opponent in Senate District 8, some of the reddest territory in the state.**

## **ACCORDING TO UNF POLITICAL SCIENCE PROFESSOR MATT CORRIGAN, GIANOULIS “[HAS] VERY RARE POSITIVES,” BUT HE QUESTIONS WHETHER SHE WILL BE ABLE TO MAINTAIN HER STERLING IMAGE DURING THE “NITTY-GRITTY” OF THE CAMPAIGN.**

here. But unlike 30 years ago, when that percentage reflected what the local job market demanded, today 60 percent of well-paying jobs require either post-secondary education or technical certificates. The local educational system isn’t keeping pace.

“If we’re not developing those individuals, no businesses are going to come here, or develop here,” Gianoulis reasons. “Why would an entrepreneur want to start a business here ... if they can’t get a workforce? Just look what has happened in cities like Charlotte or Austin, Texas, [which] have taken seriously improving education. They have industries. They have jobs.”

For Gianoulis, Florida’s investment in education is a matter of priorities that need to be discerned prior to parceling out the state’s \$70 billion budget. Deciding what the state needs and what it can do without “may sound ... naïve,” Gianoulis says, “but I really don’t think it is, because that’s how the rest of us do things.”

Gianoulis’ ability to shape political discussions around the education issue will serve her well, says Matthew Corrigan. “Education is the main function of state government,” Corrigan says, noting that Gianoulis’ campaign could generate a new discussion about public education issues in Florida.

“That might be a real opportunity to talk about FCAT, to talk about accountability, to talk about preparing kids for the 21st Century,” he says.

Plus, Corrigan speculates, there may be a “pent-up demand” among District 8’s Democrats and non-party affiliates who were shut out of the process of selecting their new state Senator in 2009. Thrasher’s de facto election occurred during a closed Republican special primary contest, held after Sen. Jim King’s death last year. A pro forma general election between Thrasher and a write-in candidate was held the following month. “They [non-Republican voters] may feel they want a voice,” says Corrigan.

But “pent-up demand,” anti-insider sentiments and voter resonance on the education issue may not be enough for Gianoulis to win. “She’s challenging a long-time leader in Republican Florida politics, a close friend of Jeb Bush,” Corrigan says. “It’s going to be a challenge.” □

*Julie Delegal is a public education advocate and freelance writer in Jacksonville who volunteered with Deborah Gianoulis throughout the 2009-10 Save Duval Schools campaign.*