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Campaign says Harris won't turn to inheritance

The Senate candidate has said for more than a week that she will use the money from her late father.

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In an effort to jump-start her sputtering Senate campaign, Rep. Katherine Harris went on national television invoking the memory of her late father and saying the money he left her will form the financial foundation of her challenge to Democratic Sen. Bill Nelson.

Now the Harris campaign says that's not the case.

Campaign spokeswoman Morgan Dobbs said Thursday that Harris will sell her existing assets rather than rely on money from her father, a bank executive who died in January.

"It is my understanding from her statements that she does not plan to use inherited money on the campaign -- rather, money from liquidating her personal assets, which she says total \$10 million," Dobbs wrote in an e-mail to the Orlando Sentinel.

"I think I am being pretty clear."

However, Dobbs' explanation is at odds with the message Harris has been delivering for more than a week.

The Republican from Longboat Key appeared on national television saying she would use the money left to her by her father to infuse her campaign with a badly needed shot of financing.

The announcement was the centerpiece of her appearance on Fox News, where Harris reaffirmed her commitment to the race.

"I'm going to take his legacy that he gave to me, everything I have, and I'm going to put it in this race," she told Sean Hannity. "I'm going to commit my legacy from my father -- \$10 million."

A moment later, Hannity asked, "This is money from your father?"

"Yes," replied Harris.

Since then, Harris, who is scheduled to campaign in Central Florida today, has answered few questions about the details of her plan.

She has said she'll run the race to honor her late father and use all the money she has for her Senate campaign.

In a transcript of an interview with ABC News this week, Harris makes reference to a poor, pious widow in a biblical parable, saying she, like the widow, was "willing to take this widow's mite . . . and put everything on the line." A mite is an ancient coin.

Dozens of news stories have mentioned the inheritance from her father. In fact, a story on Harris' campaign Web site says the \$10 million is money "she described as a legacy from her late father."

On Friday, a day after being asked about the apparent discrepancy between what Harris said last week and what Dobbs said Thursday, Dobbs sent an e-mail to the Sentinel saying she would provide no additional information.

"I do not have an official comment from the campaign on this issue," she wrote.

The mixed messages left campaign observers puzzled.

"She pledged all her inheritance from her dad," said Susan MacManus, a political analyst at the University of South Florida. "Obviously, that's where people think it's coming from.

"To say something different now just confuses matters. And the last thing her campaign needs right now is to confuse people."

Ed Still, a Birmingham, Ala., attorney who specializes in voting law and campaign-finance law, said he was unaware of any legal reason that might prompt Harris to use existing assets rather than inheritance money.

The attorney, who maintains an election law Web site, said, "As long as the money's hers, it doesn't matter whether she earned it or it was left to her." Still said it may be that the estate money will take time to make its way through the court.

In recent weeks, Harris' campaign appeared headed for collapse. It had lukewarm support from top Republicans, high staff turnover and recently became mired in questions about \$32,000 in illegal contributions that Harris had taken from a disgraced defense contractor.

Harris ultimately gave the money to charity, and investigators said the contractor did not tell her the money was tainted.

Harris' supporters had hoped the \$10 million announcement would level the financial playing field with Nelson -- he has raised far more money -- and prompt GOP donors to take their candidate more seriously.

If there are now questions about where that money will come from, donors might turn skittish.

Moreover, if Harris has decided not to use inheritance money, it will undermine her attempts to portray herself as willing to give up everything for her constituents.

On ABC this week, she said by the end of the campaign, "I won't have anything left."

But if inheritance money is no longer in play, Harris might still have millions -- \$10 million if her earlier statements are accurate -- to fall back on.

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