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Stem cell push surprise passion for lawyer

The advocate seeks to use tax money to pay for research.

By [SUSAN R. MILLER](#)

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

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From family lawyer to alien slayer, Bernard Siegel has had quite a career.

The Wellington attorney started his professional life handling child custody cases and helping parents of missing children.



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Wellington attorney Bernard Siegel is now helping push statewide efforts to get a constitutional amendment on the 2006 ballot that would permit taxpayer money to be used for stem-cell research.

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Along the way he founded the Miami Tropics, a minor league professional basketball team, was a sports agent to professional athletes and co-owned Florida Championship Wrestling — projects he calls "the candy store of life."

Siegel switched gears again in 2001, joining Coral Gables attorney Spencer Aronfeld in his malpractice and personal injury firm — the two handling numerous high-profile cases together.

But it was his decision in late 2002 to take on a UFO cult claiming to have cloned a baby that catapulted Siegel into the international spotlight and turned him into a stem cell research crusader in a battle that has taken him all the way to the United Nations.

"I feel like I jumped out of an airplane at 40,000 feet without a parachute," Siegel said. He and Palm Beach County Commissioner Burt Aronson are now leading statewide efforts to get a constitutional amendment on the 2006 ballot that would permit taxpayer money to be used for stem cell research.

"He has the scientific knowledge, and I have the political knowledge," said Aronson of his collaboration with Siegel.

Siegel contacted Aronson earlier this year when the commissioner announced he was committed to getting the amendment passed after hearing Gov. Jeb Bush say he would not allow tax dollars to be used for stem cell research.

"I think he's on the right track in trying to see that Florida becomes a cutting edge state," Siegel said of Aronson. "We have some of the best researchers, and it would be a pity if we cannot advance stem cell research in the state."

Aronson is forming a political action committee. He expects the paperwork to be completed and to start raising money by Sept. 1. Boca Raton attorney Harry Handler is drafting the amendment. Aronson's organization — Floridians for Stem Cell Research and Cures Inc. — must collect more than 611,000 signatures to get the question on next year's ballot.

Their efforts come as the moral debate over embryonic stem cell research stretches from Capitol Hill to state capitals across the country. Social conservatives argue that embryonic stem cell research is immoral, equating it to abortion. Proponents say such research can help to save the lives of those suffering from Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, spinal cord injuries and other diseases.

Siegel views his efforts as part of a "brutal policy fight." He admits getting the constitutional amendment passed in Florida is going to be an uphill battle.

"It will come down to us being able to draft an excellent amendment that's appropriate for Florida," he said.

California passed a similar amendment last year.

Battle began with human cloning

Siegel's interest in stem cell research began when he heard a news story about a UFO group called the Raelians who claimed to have cloned a baby named "Eve." The lawyer had helped his daughter with a high school paper on the cloning of Dolly the sheep and realized that cloning a baby, if it was true, could not be done safely.

A longtime child protection advocate, Siegel decided he was going to "make a footnote in some law journal" as the first case to protect the rights of a cloned human and to find out once and for all whether the Raelians' claim was true.

On New Year's Eve 2002, he filed a petition in Broward County Circuit Court seeking protective custody and asking the court to define the rights of a cloned human.

"That exploded into a media storm for him," said Aronfeld, who described his former law partner as "a visionary guy" who "liked cases that had sexiness to them."

During his research, Siegel learned that the group claiming to have cloned Eve, which calls itself Clonaid, testified before Congress and appeared before the National Academy of Sciences "as if they were real serious potential cloners," said Siegel, who opposes reproductive cloning.

Clonaid bills itself on its Web site as "the first company offering to clone human beings." It claims to have cloned 13 children. Siegel said their claims harm legitimate research efforts.

Clonaid's president Brigitte Boisselier in a written response to Siegel's comments said: "The fact that we are not taken seriously allows us to work comfortably, and we are definitely ahead of the race on stem cell research. Those who think we harm stem cell research will have to find something else to say once they witness our results. Because of Siegel, the world was prevented from seeing the cloned babies, but he certainly didn't anticipate that in doing so, he enabled us to proceed peacefully in the production of cloned embryos and personalized stem cell lines."

After Siegel filed his petition, Boisselier withdrew her offer to submit Eve's DNA for testing and said the baby had been taken to Israel.

"I am proud that here was a brilliant attorney who stood up and said if they did what they said they did, let them prove it.," said Gerald Schatten, professor of developmental biology at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. Schatten collaborated with Hwang Woo Suk, the Korean who cloned the first dog, Snuppy.

Though the media dust settled on the Raelian case, it wasn't the end for Siegel. During the legal battle, he met numerous scientists who encouraged him to serve as the legal mouthpiece for legitimate science. Among them, said Siegel, was Professor Ian Wilmut, who led the team that cloned Dolly the sheep.

"He said if I would form an organization to advance scientific research from a legal perspective, he would join the advisory board," Siegel said.

Genetics group unites advocates

Siegel left Aronfeld's firm and formed what is today the Genetics Policy Institute, a charitable project of the National Heritage Foundation Inc., a nonprofit organization that oversees the administration of more than 9,000 projects.

The GPI is funded by individuals, foundations, academic institutions and scientific societies, including the American Society For Cell Biology, the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research and the Huffington Foundation, according to Siegel.

"I realized there was a vacuum, an unmet need for an organization that could stitch together all of the stakeholders into a unified voice. I created this nonprofit organization to fill that need," said Siegel, who serves as executive director.


Since its inception in 2003, GPI has conducted numerous stem cell conferences, including one at the United Nations where a dozen leading scientists educated UN decision-makers on human cloning and stem cell research about the repercussions of an international ban on therapeutic cloning and the differences between unethical reproductive cloning and therapeutic cloning. GPI also conducted Stem Cell Awareness Day last August at the Miami Project to Cure Paralysis and co-sponsored the First International Stem Cell Action Conference at UC Berkeley.

"What's invaluable about Bernie is that he has gotten a number of us eggheads together and has translated what is scientific gobbledygook into English so that our neighbors and friends can understand it," Schatten said.

Siegel says he's not surprised that his organization has had such an impact in such a short period of time. But he added, "I am surprised that I am at the center of it."

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