



RICARDO RAMÍREZ BUXEDA/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Brendan Ganguzza, the husband of slain UCF graduate student Nicole Ganguzza, is comforted after accepting her diploma Tuesday.

DIPLOMA

FROM PAGE B1

ceived her diploma," said Eileen Alexander, Nicole Ganguzza's mother. "I'm so honored that they allowed me to do this," Brendan Ganguzza said. "It's definitely one of the better days I've had in the last six months."

On June 11, authorities found Nicole Ganguzza, 26, slain near an exercise trail close to Jay Blanchard Park

in east Orange County, a day after she went on an evening jog and never returned home.

Authorities have not found her killer. Orange County sheriff's investigators released sketches of four men seen near the park days before Ganguzza's slaying.

Though the men were named as persons of interest, all of them have been cleared, said Cpl. Susan Soto of the Orange County Sheriff's Office.

Detectives are still awaiting results from laboratory tests for trace evidence, such as hair or fibers that could lead to a suspect.

Soto said they are following leads and are looking at several people as persons of interest. However, the Sheriff's Office wouldn't provide any further comment because the investigation is ongoing.

Ganguzza's family said they hope authorities eventually will bring Nicole's killer to justice.

"It's frustrating because you can't get closure," said Andrea Alexander, Nicole Ganguzza's sister. "You're just sitting around and waiting."

"I know the effort they're putting in at the Sheriff's Office," Brendan Ganguzza said. "I have the utmost confidence that they're getting closer and eventually it'll come."

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Pari-mutuels want to turn tables on tribe

By JOSH HAFENBRACK
TALLAHASSEE BUREAU

TALLAHASSEE — South Florida's pari-mutuels said Tuesday that they would band together to seek state authorization to install blackjack tables to remain competitive with Indian gaming resorts.

As the state Legislature is poised to reopen debate over a gambling-expansion deal with the Seminole Tribe, the South Florida Gaming Coalition said legislators would snag an extra \$495 million in tax revenues by giving five tracks in Broward and Miami-Dade counties the same options as Indian resorts.

The South Florida pari-mutuel facilities already have Vegas-style slots, racing and poker tables, but executives said customers are passing them up for the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino's blackjack and baccarat tables.

"It's dire," said Dan Adkins, vice president and CEO of Mardi Gras Gaming in Hallandale. Revenues are down 22 percent at Broward tracks from last year, he said, hit by the declining economy and more attractive gaming options at Hard Rock in Hollywood.

"If we have to continue in an unfair environment, that \$495 million of potential revenue [from pari-mutuels] is gone," he said. "That's a lot of money."

At a Tallahassee news con-

ference, track executives said the South Florida facilities employ 2,500 people and, from Broward alone, ship \$132 million in tax revenues to the state. Without expanded gambling options, the industry could die, they said.

After signing a compact with Gov. Charlie Crist that promised \$100 million in annual tax payments, the Seminoles opened blackjack tables in July at the Hard Rock in Hollywood. Months later, the state Supreme Court nullified the agreement, ruling Crist should have sought legislative approval. But the blackjack tables are still open in Hollywood and at the Hard Rock casino just east of Tampa because the tribe is not governed by state law.

Struggling for revenues, legislators are considering whether to ratify Crist's deal or try to modify its terms. The Republican-run House, usually an impediment to gambling initiatives, has appointed a select committee to study the compact.

Changing the deal with the Seminoles won't be easy. The tribe agreed to the compact with the state based on the promise of "exclusivity," its attorney Barry Richard said. If other casinos get table games the tribe won't feel bound by the deal, he said.

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House leader: Fundraising wasn't issue in assignments

By JOSH HAFENBRACK
TALLAHASSEE BUREAU

TALLAHASSEE — Already under pressure after less than a month into the job, House Democratic Leader Franklin Sands expressed regret Tuesday for any "impression" that he might have handed out legislative committee assignments based on fundraising during the campaign season.

Sands, a Broward County lawmaker, was on the defensive after a published report that Orlando Democratic Rep. Geraldine Thompson asked legislators for information on how much money they raised for the Florida Democratic Party and its candidates, indicating it would be a factor in deciding which members land coveted slots.

Rep. Audrey Gibson, D-Jacksonville, said Tuesday she was "appalled" to receive a voice-mail message from Thompson linking her fundraising performance to committee assignments. *The Palm Beach Post* first reported the controversy Monday.

"I deeply regret if any legislator, or any citizen, is left with an impression that

party fundraising activities or political donations would ever have been a *quid pro quo* for obtaining committee-assignment recommendations," Sands said in a statement.

With that, Sands' two-year tenure running the 44-member Democratic minority in the Florida House was off to a turbulent start. But Democrats, in Tallahassee this week for meetings, expressed confidence they will patch internal fissures and present a unified front heading into a January special session on the budget.

In an interview, Sands denied any pay-to-play system and said his statement was meant to express regret for the impression created by media reports, not his actions.

"The issue is: Was there a nexus between committee assignments and fundraising — and the answer is absolutely not," he said.

To legislators, a well-placed committee assignment can mean a major political boost. Sands appointed a five-member working group to dole out the posts. A few plums were on nearly everyone's list: 40 of the 44 Democrats asked for slots on the ap-

propriations committee, which controls the state's purse strings.

Whether legislators had raised money for other Democrats and would pledge to do so in the future was "one out of an array of factors" in placements, said Rep. Keith Fitzgerald, D-Sarasota.

Rep. Mary Brandenburg, D-West Palm Beach, said members of the group asked her for three things: a résumé, her committee preferences and an accounting of the donations she made and planned to make for Democratic candidates.

Brandenburg, who was busy with her own campaign this fall, reported that she didn't raise any money for other Democrats. But she had few complaints about her assignments on agriculture and health-care committees.

Rep. Kelly Skidmore, D-Boca Raton, who was part of the group that gave out committee assignments, said making everyone happy was impossible. She noted that Sands is new to the job of running an often unruly Democratic caucus.

"It's all new to him; there's going to be some growing pains and we anticipate that," she said.

Fugitive mom found in disguise

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FORT LAUDERDALE — A fugitive mother who police said hid with her two daughters in a hole carved from the sand beneath a beach playground was found Tuesday in South Florida, authorities said.

Tammy Kong-Kham, 35, and 8-year-old Kimberly Kong-Kham were recognized near a Tamarac store's loading dock by a

code-enforcement officer making his rounds. He then notified the Broward County Sheriff's Office.

Mother and daughter were in good condition, according to a statement from Fort Lauderdale police.

Kong-Kham hid Kimberly and 10-year-old Kelley Kong-Kham in a hole dug into the sand under a Fort Lauderdale beach playground for at least two weeks, often going days without food, police

said. Police found Kelley begging for food at a Fort Lauderdale mall Dec. 4. She led authorities to the playground and told them that she and her sister could hear children playing above them while they huddled out of sight in a space too small for them to sit upright.

Kong-Kham, who had disguised herself with a long, black wig, was being questioned by investigators.




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