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Foley talks about surviving scandal

Disgraced congressman discusses abuse, sexuality and the support he's found.

By MICHELE DARGAN
Daily News Staff Writer

Former U.S. Rep. Mark Foley choked up and wiped away tears a few times Friday.

He became emotional when he spoke of his late partner, Dr. Layne Nisenbaum, a Palm Beach dermatologist.

He choked up when he mentioned his late father, Edward Foley.

And he wiped away tears when he spoke of the kindness of friends who stood by him after he resigned from Congress in disgrace.

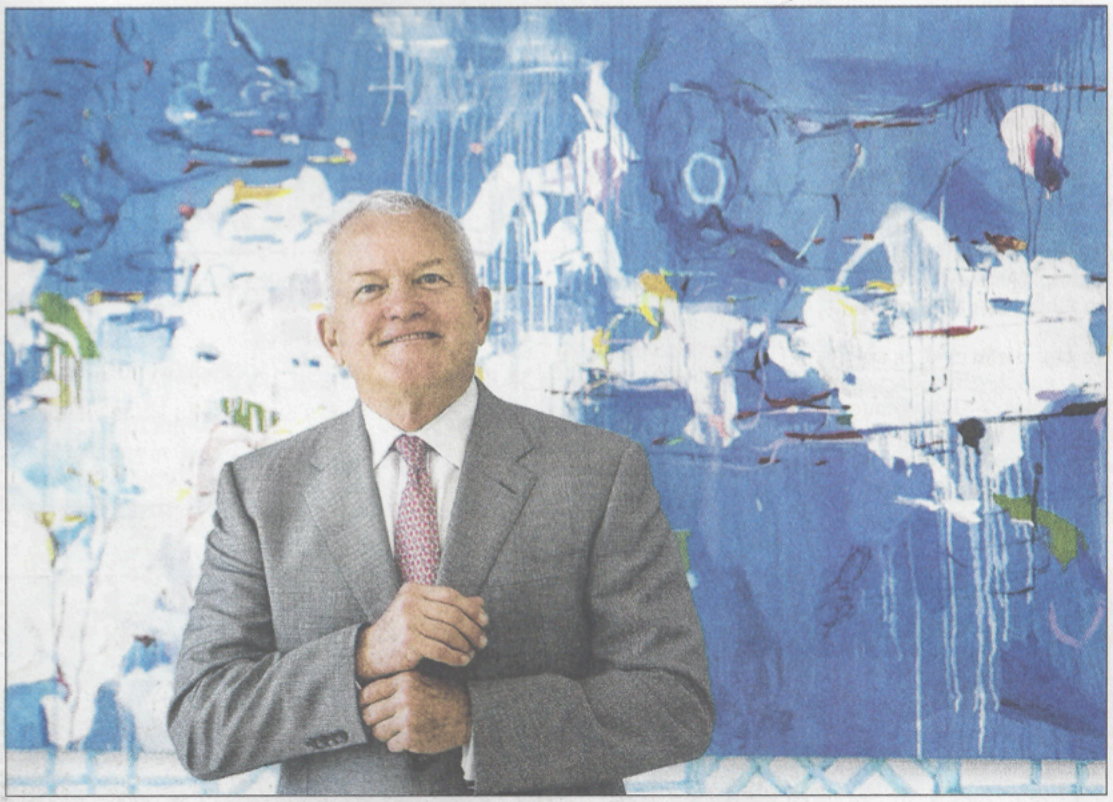
It will be 10 years in September since Foley resigned after a national news outlet exposed sexually explicit e-mails and instant messages sent to at least one former, underage congressional page.

Talking publicly for the first time about the events surrounding his resignation, Foley, 61, spoke to a luncheon gathering of 55 people about surviving scandal during a Clicking In forum at The Colony. Founded by Lani Click, the group presents lectures on leadership, entrepreneurship, arts and sciences. Foley received a standing ovation at the end of his speech.

He spoke candidly about being molested as a child, hiding the fact he was gay and surviving the "deepest, darkest time" of his life when the scandal broke.

Foley talked about being sexually abused by a Roman Catholic priest when he was an 11-year-old altar boy. The abuse lasted three years, he said.

Please see FOLEY, Page A10



Meghan McCarthy / Daily News

Former U.S. Rep. Mark Foley began his political career in Lake Worth as a city commissioner and vice mayor and moved up the political ladder to the Florida House, Senate and eventually Congress.

FOLEY

Disgraced politician on scandal: 'You can't survive it by papering over it'

From Page A1

"He took me places, bought me things and let me drive his car," Foley said. "He took me to a sauna in Lake Worth. From that moment, it changed my life."

Foley said the priest told him that he must not tell his parents or he will kill himself. It was a secret Foley kept from everyone until the 2006 scandal broke.

For years afterward, Foley said he "couldn't muster the strength" to attend church. When his mother told him to go to church, Foley said he would go in, grab a bulletin and go home, so that she would think he attended.

In his early teenage years, Foley said he turned to drugs and failed the eighth grade. But in his late teen years, he decided to turn his life around; he became an overachiever.

"Back in those days, you couldn't acknowledge being gay under any circumstances or you'd ruin any friendship you had," he said. "And you knew that simply by hearing your friends talk about some guy who may have been effeminate and who may not have been gay, but the horrible words and treatment of that person — mocking and making fun and saying degrading things about them — made you stop and think, 'I'm certainly not going to be called that.'"

He began his political career in Lake Worth as a city commissioner and vice mayor and moved up the political ladder to the Florida House, Senate and U.S. Congress.

"Never having dealt with the underlying issue, I was masking my true identity to the world," he said. "Throughout all those career advancements, rather than have the courage of acknowledging I was gay and the courage I should have had to discuss that deep secret inside of me — not my parents, or my sisters or anyone in my world knew what I had experienced over a three-year period with a Catholic priest. It continued to burn in my soul."

Never having received any counseling or therapy for the abuse he suffered as a child led "to that horrific period" where he engaged in inappropriate Internet conversations, he said.

"Late at night, drinking red wine at my desk, the computer — I found out later in deep therapy — became my confessional and I could spew things out of my mouth that I felt had no consequence

Please see FOLEY, Page A11