

LOCAL & STATE

How Ashley Moody's deep roots shaped the future of Florida's next U.S. senator

BY DAN SULLIVAN
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Tampa Bay Times

Gov. Ron DeSantis' announcement that he's appointing Florida Attorney General Ashley Moody to fill the U.S. Senate seat vacated by Marco Rubio places the 49-year-old Plant City native in an exotic locale

far from home. But if her personal history is any indication, she will attract notice in Washington as a hard-charging — and highly partisan — advocate for her home state. "Every day I go to work, every decision that I make, every person I hire, I do so with the understanding that the people of Florida gave me this opportunity," she said after Thursday's announcement. "And I want to deliver on what I assured them."

From Plant City's Strawberry Queen, to a top university student, to a federal prosecutor, to a Hillsborough County judge, to state attorney general, this homegrown talent now finds herself on a national and global stage.

"She's never forgotten where she's from," said former Hillsborough Chief Judge Ronald Ficarrotta, who worked alongside Moody in the judiciary. "I'm a Democrat, but I still have a great deal of respect for her."

was born in 1975 in Plant City. To know her is to know her hometown. The small yet growing city about 25 miles east of Tampa is a place that relishes small-town values and its agrarian past. It's known as the Winter Strawberry Capital of the World, a reference to the area's biggest cash crop.



Florida Attorney General Ashley Moody will replace Marco Rubio in the U.S. Senate.

FROM STRAWBERRY QUEEN TO FEDERAL PROSECUTOR
Ashley Brooke Moody

SEE MOODY, 14A



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DEMOCRATIC LEADER HONORS 5000 ROLE MODELS

U.S. Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y., the House minority leader, helps inductee and Miami Dolphins offensive tackle Terron Armstead at the 5000 Role Models of Excellence Foundation's 32nd Annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship Breakfast at the Miami Beach Convention Center on Saturday. The breakfast, the cornerstone of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday weekend in South Florida, honors Black and brown youths and mentors and is typically held on the King holiday but was moved this year because of Inauguration Day on Monday. **Story, 16A**

Judge dismisses lawsuit against Díaz de la Portilla, citing legislative shield

BY TESS RISKI
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A judge on Thursday dismissed a lawsuit accusing former Miami City Commissioner Alex Díaz de la Portilla of orchestrating a "shakedown" scheme by pressuring the longtime operator of the Rickenbacker Marina to take on the commissioner's associate as a business partner in exchange for the commissioner's vote on a redevelopment deal. The ruling marks the second legal victory for Díaz de la Portilla in the

past two months as he tees up a possible run for Miami mayor. In November, the Broward State Attorney's Office dismissed a criminal corruption case against Díaz de la Portilla, clearing him of the charges just weeks before the case was to go to trial. The lawsuit dismissed Thursday, involving different allegations, was filed by lobbyist Manuel Prieguez. In his September 2023 complaint, Prieguez alleged that Díaz de la Portilla



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Miami City Commissioner Alex Díaz De La Portilla was accused of pushing the operator of the Rickenbacker Marina to take on an associate of his as business partner in exchange for Díaz De La Portilla's vote on a redevelopment deal.

SEE LAWSUIT, 15A

Readers' generosity leads to unexpected gift for South Florida teen over the holidays

BY HOWARD COHEN
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Wishes do come true over the holidays. Every year since December 1982, the Miami Herald has shared Wish Book stories of South Florida people in need. The goal: for readers to help their neighbors. And this year, the tradition continued, along with an unexpected gift. "We were able to grant wishes for 184 families," said Roberta DiPietro, Wish Book coordinator. "However, there are still some challenging requests left to fulfill, including furniture, AC repair, medical equipment, auto repair and housing support. We remain committed to completing these wishes to the highest level possible in the weeks to come."



Courtesy Multiple Sclerosis Foundation

Deryan Deal, a 19-year-old engineering student, received a scooter from Wish Book donor Bernhard Lukoschek of Miramar.



HOW MUCH DID WISH BOOK 2024 RAISE?

So far, the 2024 Wish Book season has raised \$260,872 in funds, DiPietro said. In 2023, \$288,403 was donated. Readers can still contribute at any time during the year. The donations reflect "the extraordinary generosity of our community, funding causes to support the families impacted by the storms earlier in the

fall," she said. **CHALLENGES AND GENEROSITY** The storms, two major hurricanes, Helene and Milton, hit Florida on Sept. 26 and Oct. 9 — not even two weeks apart. The disasters cascaded Gulf waters through thousands of already battered homes along the state's west coast. In November, as the Wish Book season began, FEMA announced that residents in one heavily damaged region, tourism-friendly Fort Myers Beach, should expect an average increase in their flood insurance costs in 2025. Residents could even face losing their coverage if rebuilding isn't done properly — meaning, among other measures, placing homes on higher ground. Elsewhere, readers' budgets were stretched thin by the surging costs of simply living. Yet we opened our wallets and hearts. And gave again. "Year after year, our readers come together to make a profound difference in the lives of individuals and families in need. Wish Book embodies the mission of the Miami Herald and el Nuevo Herald — to shine a light on chal-

SEE WISH BOOK, 16A

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