

Ball & chain party is for a good cause

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It's reminiscent of the scene repeated in many old Westerns, where the whole town turns out amid a festive atmosphere to watch a villain get his just rewards.

Except we're talking 2008, the town is Springfield, and the scoundrel is the governor of the state.

"We all observed last Tuesday (Dec. 9, when Gov. Rod Blagojevich was arrested at his Chicago home on federal corruption charges) that there was a celebratory atmosphere in Springfield," said Kevan Kavanaugh, president and general manager of Mid-West Family Broadcasting in Springfield. "There were almost people dancing in the streets."

Kavanaugh was at a Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce breakfast Dec. 9 and noticed about 8:30 a.m. that people's cell phones started going off.

"There was a buzz around the room," he said. "Even in a chamber of commerce setting, people were almost gleeful."

He said the people at Mid-West's four local radio stations — WNNS, WQLZ, WLCE and WMAY — were joking that somebody needed to throw a party.

People at the Alamo downtown said they'd host it, the Party Tree was enlisted to decorate, and the Governor's Ball & Chain Party was born. Included were "F-bomb" shots (in honor of the governor's colorful language caught on tape), gift certificates from Easterday Plumbing — "Another governor goes down the drain" — and the opportunity to have your picture taken with a version of the governor, with the proceeds going to Crime Stoppers.

Psychologists say there are several reasons that could explain Springfield's giddy behavior, which has manifested itself in e-mail jokes, poems and pictures and even a perverse sense of pride that Illinois is No. 1 in political corruption — USA Today rankings notwithstanding.

"It has something to do with how much people hated the governor up to now," said James Myers, a Springfield psychologist. "It's kind of a revenge thing."

Myers said Blagojevich, who had a 23 percent approval rating even before the federal charges, "had this holier-than-thou attitude and treated state workers so poorly."

"State workers had to take this ethics test, and most of them have little opportunity to be dishonest," Myers said. "This is a result of all the frustration."

Marcel Yoder, associate professor of psychology at the University of Illinois at Springfield, said many people have a tendency to believe the world is a just place.

"They're glad the governor is getting his comeuppance for doing things policywise or otherwise that have affected them negatively," Yoder said. "Some endorse that world view more than others."

A simpler explanation may be something the Germans summed up in one word: schadenfreude.

"That means taking joy in the misery of others," Yoder said. "It's a common reaction to make you feel better about yourself."

Yoder also pitches the idea of retributive justice; that Blagojevich needs to be held accountable for his perceived misdeeds.

"We have scripts for the way we're supposed to behave, and when we violate these scripts, people don't like it," he said. "It creates negative feelings."

Those negative feelings can be expressed by sending letters to the editor, calling in to radio talk shows, or just wearing them on your T-shirt.

CafePress.com, an e-commerce Web site based in San Mateo, Calif. that lets customers upload images to appear on hats, T-shirts, mugs and other objects, now boasts 411 different Blagojevich designs on 16,700 products. The mostly humorous slogans range from the expected, such as "Don't Blame Me, I Voted for Topinka," to some that might make anyone but Rod and Patti blush.

You can get a picture of President-elect Barack Obama holding up two fingers with the slogan, "2 down" and images of Blagojevich and former Gov.

George Ryan. One T-shirt says simply, "Crook County Illinois" and another features Blagojevich's face with the words, "Corrupt With Bad Hair."

It's a good bet there weren't anywhere near 400 Blago images available on, say Dec. 8.

"It's a phenomenon we see on a regular basis," said a spokesman. "It's a barometer of public opinion. It's how people choose to communicate and express their point of view."

CafePress members, called "shopkeepers," can create a design, set a price and sell it to others on the Web site. CafePress supplies and sets the price on the T-shirts, buttons, etc., which are distributed whenever orders are placed.

The huge spike in Blagojevich-related items is similar to what CafePress saw with the Eliot Spitzer scandal. Spitzer resigned as governor of New York on March 17 in the wake of his involvement in a high-priced prostitution ring being made public.

Myers said Blagojevich has kept up "a sanctimonious criticism of state workers" during his time in office.

"Now he's been shown to be a hypocrite, and people like to see a hypocrite outed," Myers said.

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