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## Restaurant tycoon Fertitta goes extra mile for friends

■ Intense loyalty seen after tragic Giffords shooting

By ZAIN SHAUK

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For six months, he has been a giant in the background for U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords and her husband, quietly leveraging his power to help the couple rebound from devastation.

His private jets, his home in River Oaks, his ranch, his media connections and even his restaurant empire have played roles in simultaneously supporting Giffords and protecting her from public view as she has pushed through her recovery, sources close to Giffords said.

But Houston restaurant tycoon Tilman Fertitta, a close friend of Giffords' husband, League City astronaut Mark Kelly, doesn't think much of his role, even as it highlights a compassionate side of his personality often lost amid headlines about his hardball business tactics.

"That's just what you do," 54-year-old Fertitta said of his efforts to help Kelly and Giffords.

Besides, said the man who held a party on his yacht in Florida to celebrate Kelly's role in commanding the final launch of the space shuttle Endeavour, Kelly is as close as a friend can get.

Fertitta's reaction to the shooting that almost took Giffords' life was automatic, a



DAVE ROSSMAN : FOR THE CHRONICLE

**AUTOMATIC RESPONSE:** When astronaut Mark Kelly's wife, U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, was gravely wounded six months ago, he knew he could count on longtime friend Tilman Fertitta, right.

natural response for a man who has a small circle to whom he shows unyielding loyalty.

"That's what happens when things like this happen in families," he said.

Doctors have said that Giffords' rehabilitation from a gunshot wound to the head has been helped by opportunities to leave the hospital, something she did frequently

# FERTITTA: Friends call him tough but fiercely loyal

as a result of Fertitta's help, even before she checked out of TIRR Memorial Hermann in Houston on June 15.

"Tilman has been a great friend to Gabby and me," Kelly told the Houston Chronicle. "He and (his wife) Paige have done everything they could possibly do to support us through this very difficult time. Without their assistance this would have been a much more difficult experience."

Fertitta's help has given Giffords escapes from her hospital setting, extensive time with her husband, and a rejuvenating weekend trip to Tucson. All have helped the Arizona congresswoman make an improbable recovery that has so far surpassed her doctors' expectations.

In seven months, she has progressed from near death after a bullet was shot through her brain Jan. 8, to an appearance at a NASA event in front of hundreds last month. There, she smiled, laughed, spoke with those around her and rose from a wheelchair to kiss and hug her husband.

## 'Gabby's been shot'

Throughout her recovery, Fertitta has supported Giffords with an intensity usually associated with his business persona.

"I'm there for my friends, and I'd like to think I'm there for my employees," he said.

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*"He and Paige have done everything they could possibly do to support us through this very difficult time."*

MARK KELLY, speaking of his friendship with the Fertittas

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Fertitta, a Galveston native, owns Landry's Restaurants, which counts among its \$4 billion in assets hotels, entertainment venues and more than 30 restaurant brands nationally — Rainforest Cafe, Joe's Crab Shack, and Golden Nugget hotels and casinos among them.

He has been known to dump garbage cans onto kitchen floors to confront employees about discarded silverware (then tip them afterwards to clean it up), and to publicly criticize companies he is trying to acquire. For Giffords, his energy was channeled into a protective role, his friends said.

It started on the day Giffords was shot while meeting with constituents outside a Tucson supermarket. Minutes after it happened, Kelly emailed Fertitta, who got the message on his Blackberry.

"Gabby's been shot," it read.

Kelly and Fertitta had become good friends in recent years, with Fertitta hosting a 2010 campaign fundraiser for Giffords at his 18,800-square foot River Oaks mansion. The

men and their wives had also vacationed together and often met for dinners when Giffords came to Houston on trips from Washington or Tucson.

## Debunked death reports

When Fertitta got the email, his 12-seat Bombardier Challenger jet was refueling at Hobby Airport. He arranged for it to fly to Tucson, with Kelly, his two daughters from a previous marriage, and his mother on board. As the plane was en route, Fertitta heard reports that Giffords had died and suspected they were erroneous.

With an aggressive drive that has become a hallmark of the headstrong multimillionaire, Fertitta set out to debunk the reports, even before confirming they were false. Kelly, devastated by the news, broke down in a bathroom on the plane.

His twin brother, astronaut Scott Kelly, was on the International Space Station 220 miles above Earth. He tried to reach Kelly on his cellphone to ask about the reports, but could not get through. His next call was to Fertitta.

Fertitta contacted his close friend Tom Koch, an anchor for KTRK (Channel 13). He asked that Koch pass confirmation to ABC News in New York as soon as Kelly could find out whether Giffords was alive. Kelly called the hospital and then the Houston ABC affiliate, quickly spreading the story and countering the earlier reports.

Later, when Kelly and Giffords moved to Houston for treatment on Jan. 21 (flying again on Fertitta's Challenger jet), Fertitta offered a guest house at his home to the astronaut. Kelly stayed there for much of the last six months, an arrangement that kept him far closer to Giffords' bedside at TIRR Memorial Hermann than his League City home.

Fertitta's home, ranch and restaurant have also been used as refuges from the hospital setting throughout Giffords' recovery, allowing the congresswoman to experience more normal environments without being hounded by the news media.

Fertitta's friends said his persistence in supporting Kelly grows out of his tenacious character in the business world, an arena where he recently declared about a potential acquisition of national seafood chain McCormick & Schmick's, "When it's all over, I'll end up with it, because that's just the way it is."

That determined mentality, although most associated with his business dealings, translates to Fertitta's efforts for the causes and people he cares about, his friends said. He doesn't hesitate to insert himself into dominant positions where his "operator mentality" takes hold, said Scott Kelly, another close friend of Fertitta's.

## Public involvement, too

Fertitta is chairman of the Houston Children's Charity and the Houston Police Foundation. He also sits on the board of regents for the University of Houston, and is on the board of directors for the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Texas Heart Institute.

"You've got to be tough to succeed in business, and he can be tough, but he's tough in a principled, compassionate way," said Dave Jacquin, the owner of North Point Advisors and yet another friend of Fertitta's.

His unflinching support for a friend like Kelly was not unexpected for a man who lets few people into his circle, his friends said.

"He'd be the first call we'd all make," said Gerry Del Prete, a close friend who now works for Fertitta. "He's kind of like that guy. He's kind of like the alpha male."

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