

Alone in Washington, Rusty Bowers tells world what happened in Arizona

In refusing to help overturn the 2020 election, the Republican lawmaker was harassed and ostracized

By Yvonne Wingett Sanchez
June 21, 2022 at 8:01 p.m. EDT

Hours before Arizona House Speaker Russell “Rusty” Bowers (R) testified about how he refused to help Donald Trump overturn the 2020 election results, he sat alone in his Capitol Hill hotel room, reading quotes about courage from John F. Kennedy and watching a church elder’s video about being a peacemaker.

Bowers, 69, dressed in a new white shirt and a suit he bought years ago, one he saves for special occasions, like visiting a temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Though formal, it makes him feel comfortable.

The lifelong Republican had packed a red tie but it felt too bold, so he put on a blue one instead. He then walked alone to the U.S. Capitol grounds and slowly found his way to the hearing room that would become the setting of the highest-profile moment of his decades-long political career.

Bowers was subpoenaed by the House committee investigating the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection to testify about the events that followed Trump’s 10,457-vote loss in Arizona. Bowers had voted for Trump, campaigned for Trump, but would not violate the law for him — and, as a result, his political future was jeopardized, his character was questioned and his family was harassed as his daughter was dying.

He awoke early Tuesday to read some of the notes he kept during that time, written in cursive in personal notebooks.

“Am I overprepared?” Bowers said in an interview. “I have no idea. We’ll find out when I walk in that room.”

As he walked in, his goal was to bring a measure of conciliation, not conflict, to this moment.

“I would like to, for whatever small part I had, reduce conflict and work toward a more ongoing reconciliation of people,” he said. “I don’t need to win anything.”

Shortly before the hearing began, he fielded a call from an attorney for the Arizona House who relayed that Trump had put out a statement asserting that Bowers “told me the election was rigged and that I won Arizona.” Bowers chuckled at the absurdity.

In the hearing room, Bowers sat alongside Georgia election officials Brad Raffensperger and Gabe Sterling, who faced similar pressure by Trump and his allies to reverse his loss there. Later in the day, the committee heard testimony from former Georgia election worker Wandrea ArShaye “Shaye” Moss, whose life was threatened after Rudy Giuliani, an attorney for Trump, claimed she participated in a fake ballot scheme. Bowers and Moss both received the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award this year for their efforts to protect democracy.

Bowers went first and began his testimony by rebutting Trump’s statement.

“I did have a conversation with the president,” he said carefully and deliberately, his glasses perched on the end of his nose. “That certainly isn’t it. Anywhere anyone, anytime, has said that I said the election was rigged — that would not be true.”

Bowers — a professional artist known for his storytelling — then recounted his first conversation with Trump and Giuliani, which came after a church service in the weeks after the 2020 election. Bowers recalled them asking him to convene the legislature to investigate their unsubstantiated allegations of voter fraud and set in motion a strategy to replace chosen electors with another group more favorable to Trump. Bowers repeatedly asked them for evidence beyond hearsay and innuendo that the election was stolen. Giuliani said he would deliver such evidence, but it never came. Bowers said he told them their legal theory was foreign to him and that he needed to consult with his attorneys.

“I said, ‘Look, you are asking me to do something that is counter to my oath,’ ” Bowers testified. He told the men he would not break his oath and would uphold the Constitution.

Over several weeks, Giuliani and other Trump allies failed to produce the promised paperwork, and Bowers refused to authorize an official legislative hearing to review the allegations of widespread fraud. A “circus had been brewing” around these allegations, and Bowers said he didn’t want it brought into the Arizona House.

Instead, another GOP House member and vocal election denier held a meeting featuring claims of improprieties at a downtown Phoenix hotel. That same day, Gov. Doug Ducey (R) certified Arizona’s election results.

The next day, Dec. 1, 2020, Bowers attended an in-person meeting with Giuliani, attorney Jenna Ellis, Arizona GOP state lawmakers and others, where he was again pressed to help overturn the election results.

He remembered something Giuliani said: “He said, ‘We’ve got lots of theories — we just don’t have the evidence.’ ”

At the time, Bowers wrote in a journal page that he told Giuliani and the group, “The US Constit. does not say I can reverse the laws I work to uphold which color this very issue.”

In the absence of proof from Giuliani and others, the Arizona speaker felt he was being asked to violate his oath to the Constitution.

“I will not do that, and,” Bowers testified, pausing to control his emotions. “On more than one — on more than one occasion throughout all this it has been brought up. And it is a tenet of my faith that the Constitution is divinely inspired — of my most basic foundational beliefs. And so for me to do that because somebody just asked me to is foreign to my very being.

“I will not do it.”

On Jan. 3, 2021, an Arizona House attorney spoke with pro-Trump lawyer John Eastman, who previewed a legal theory for decertifying Arizona's electors. The next day, Eastman laid out his theory during a call with Bowers, who asked him if his strategy had ever been tested. Eastman encouraged him to just give it a try and let the courts sort it out. Bowers declined.

A final attempt to persuade Bowers came the morning of Jan. 6, shortly before the Capitol riot.

It came from his own congressman, Rep. Andy Biggs (R-Ariz.), a loyal Trump ally, former Arizona Senate president and former chairman of the House Freedom Caucus who loudly sowed doubt about the 2020 election results. He asked Bowers to support decertifying the electors.

"I said I would not," Bowers recalled.

That firm stance made him the target of protests and nasty accusations. In early December, "Stop the Steal" supporters gathered inside the lobby of the state House. Bowers was out of town at the time, but some in the crowd shouted his name. On Tuesday the committee unveiled video featuring these protesters, including Jake Angeli, the "QAnon shaman" who wore a fur hat, horns and face paint as he entered the Capitol on Jan. 6. It was an ominous sign of the violence that would come.

In the weeks that followed, Bowers's neighborhood in Mesa, a suburb east of Phoenix, was practically occupied at times by caravans of Trump supporters.

They screamed at Bowers through bullhorns, filmed his home and led parades to ridicule him that featured a civilian military-style truck. At one point, a man showed up with a gun and was threatening Bowers's neighbor.

"When I saw the gun, I knew I had to get close," he testified.

Enraged pro-Trump voters unsuccessfully sought to recall Bowers, and Bowers said they distributed fliers accusing him of corruption and pedophilia.

As the drama unfolded outside his home, his daughter, Kacey, was dying inside it.

She was "upset by what was happening outside, and my wife is a valiant person. Very, very strong. Quiet. Very strong woman," Bowers said, his chin quivering. "So, it was disturbing. It was disturbing."

Kacey Bowers died Jan. 28, 2021, as efforts by some Republicans to deepen doubts about Trump's loss accelerated and plunged her father deeper into the debate over the 2020 election. He has tried to convince his fellow Republicans that he is doing the right thing, but with little luck. He faces challengers in Arizona's Aug. 2 Republican primary.

It's a position he's willing to live with. He thinks that judgment by voters is trivial compared to eventual judgment from his maker. At the end of his testimony, Bowers read a journal entry from December 2020.

"I may, in the eyes of men, not hold correct opinions or act according to their vision or convictions, but I do not take this current situation in a light manner, a fearful manner or a vengeful manner," he said. "I do not want to be a winner by cheating. I will not play with laws I swore allegiance to. With any contrived desire toward deflection of my deep, foundational desire to follow God's will as I believe he led my conscience to embrace. How else will I ever approach him in the wilderness of life knowing that I ask this guidance only to show myself a coward in defending the course ... he led me to take."

After testifying, Bowers made his way to the airport, heading home to finish the core duties of the state legislature: To pass a budget before the end of the fiscal year. A heavier task awaits him this weekend: Picking up his daughter's tombstone.

As he ate a salad alone, he realized that he forgot to tell the panel that he will not be coerced out of public service.

"They can beat me," he said of the upcoming election, "but they're not going to bully me."