

# Influencers

**ANTELO AND WILLIAMS:**  
Former Podesta Group  
Democrat joins forces  
with Republican aide.



Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call

## LOBBYING

# Fresh Start For Podesta Refugee

By KATE ACKLEY

**C**ristina Antelo and Mark Williams both grew up in the Dallas suburbs, playing drums in their school marching bands, graduating the same year and eventually making their way to the political world of the nation's capital.

Despite their shared paths, the duo didn't meet until this year when Williams, then chief of staff for a Texas House Republican, began scouting job opportunities on K Street. Antelo, a longtime Democratic lobbyist, launched her own firm, Ferox Strategies, after her previous shop, the high-profile Podesta Group, imploded amid scandal over work for a Ukrainian client

that caught the eye of Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller III's investigation.

She was on the hunt for another lobbyist to help with such clients as Walmart, Disney, pharmaceutical company Mylan, and the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, among others.

A mutual acquaintance, lobbyist Grisella Martinez of the National Association of Broadcasters, connected Williams and Antelo. "There was something that kind of struck me about both of them," Martinez says. "I thought, I bet these two would get along."

Despite coming from opposite sides of the political aisle, the two discovered their similar backgrounds and professional visions. After meeting over

coffee a handful of times this spring, they decided Williams would make a good fit to join the lobby shop. He signed on in July after departing the office of Rep. K. Michael Conaway, who is retiring.

"Our kids are the exact same age," Williams says. "We're both Latino. . . . We both got married in St. John."

"What are the chances?" Antelo says, laughing, during an interview in Ferox's offices near the U.S. Capitol.

Some of their similarities are more painful. Both of them have lost a parent to diseases that now drive their activism. Antelo raises money for multiple sclerosis causes in memory of her mother, while Williams recently completed an Ironman triathlon to raise

money for multiple myeloma research in memory of his father.

Their connections and Williams' background sold Antelo on bringing him on.

"We got to about 10 or 12 clients, and I was like, 'OK, I can't do all of this by myself, I would like to get some help,'" Antelo recalls. "I thought it was going to be Democrats, but then I met this guy and I was like, 'Wait a second — a Republican.' That was one of the things I did love about my old firm, that we were bipartisan. . . . I missed having a Republican to get intel from the other side."

Without naming the client, Antelo says Williams' GOP credentials have already resulted in giving the firm an in with the Trump administration.

“He’s been on the job for two-three months, and we’ve got an issue over at Treasury, and it’s not like Trump and I go way back,” Antelo says. “So I said, ‘Hey, I need you to get into Treasury. Go ferret something out, get some folks to connect you, figure it out.’ And within a couple of weeks, he just delivered some really great intel out of Treasury, and that was super helpful for one of our clients.”

Williams is under a one-year ban on lobbying Conaway’s office but faces no restrictions on the rest of Congress or on the executive branch. He is prohibited from representing foreign government and political party clients for a year, he says, work that Ferox isn’t doing currently.

Antelo says she would pick up such clients, subject to the law, despite the Podesta Group’s turmoil after improperly disclosing its international representation. Antelo herself worked for the client at the subject of controversy, the European Centre for a Modern Ukraine, according to years-late FARA reports filed in

2017 covering work done from 2012 to 2014. The Podesta Group worked with Paul Manafort — a Trump 2016 campaign chairman, who is now in prison on tax and bank fraud convictions — on the Ukraine client.

“We will follow the rules meticulously,” Antelo says.

For now, the work is domestic.

Both Antelo and Williams say they want to grow the business. The office space has room for new hires, while Williams is seeking to bring on clients, especially in sectors such as agriculture and tax, his focus on Capitol Hill. Conaway is a former chairman of the House Agriculture panel, and Williams previously worked for then-Rep. Sam Johnson, another Texas Republican who was a senior member of the Ways and Means Committee, which has jurisdiction over tax, trade and health policy.

“He’s super eager. He’s got his spreadsheets,” Antelo says of her new colleague. “Let me tell you, it’s a lot slower than you think it is. There’s a learning curve.”

Both lobbyists have experi-

ence working on immigration matters, and Ferox registered this year to lobby on behalf of Decision Science, a security and contraband-detection enterprise, on border issues.

In addition to the two main lobbyists, Ferox has a chief of staff, Lucia Alonzo, and a policy analyst, Anna Trevino.

Antelo, who owns the firm, and Williams say they don’t yet know how big they’d like the outfit to get, but Antelo doesn’t aim for Podesta’s size of more than 80 professionals.

“I don’t want to be that big,” she says. “I do want to have some partners, and I do want to be able to have clients in every sector and have a diverse team that can handle all kinds of issues.”

The name of the firm, Ferox, is the Latin word for fierce, or aggressive — something Antelo says she has been called, not always in a complimentary way.

“I just decided to grab it with both hands and accept it,” she says.

Williams adds, “When I was

talking to other people about Cristina, one of the things they talked about was her aggressiveness. I think in some of the conversations they meant it as a detractor, but the way that I took it, I was like, ‘This is exactly what I’m looking for.’ That’s the kind of team I want to be a part of.”

Antelo says she’s working to have the firm certified as a women-owned, minority-owned business. And though she doesn’t intend for Ferox to specialize in any particular policy issue or on a specific group of lawmakers, she says clients want lobbyists with longtime connections to the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, which has 38 members this Congress; the Congressional Black Caucus; and women members.

Clients are looking for a firm that is “savvy and smart and works their butts off, oh and, by the way, has entree with all of these groups because we didn’t just start talking to the CBC or the CHC last week or last election,” she says. “We’ve been doing that for over a decade.” ■

## IN BRIEF

### ■ Bridget Handy

has left the House Education and Labor Committee, where she was a communications assistant for the Republicans. She’s now a government relations liaison at Live Action, an anti-abortion group.



■ **Alex Monié** is now a policy analyst at law and lobbying firm Akin Gump Strauss Hauer and Feld. He was a professional staff member for Senate Finance Committee Chairman Charles E. Grassley, the Iowa Republican.

■ **Marsha Espinosa** is now California Democratic Rep. Linda T. Sánchez’s chief of staff. She was a partner at Swann Street Strategies, a public relations firms.

■ **Ryan Dierker** is now a legislative assistant for Mark Amodei of Nevada. He was previously a senior legislative assistant to another House Republican, Brad Wenstrup of Ohio.



■ **Courtney Broderick** is now a legislative assistant to Texas Democratic Rep. Sylvia R. Garcia. She was previously an aide to Texas state Sen. Nathan Johnson, who is also a Democrat.

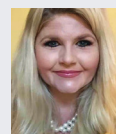
■ **Mia Keelys** has left her position as a policy advisor to the Congressional Black Caucus on health care issues. She’s joined the American Medical Association as director of health equity policy and advocacy.



■ **Catherine Costakos** has left her position as communications director to Missouri GOP Rep. Blaine Luetkemeyer. She’s now on the financial communications team at Edelman, a public relations firm.



■ **Kristina Baum**, who was communications director for the Republicans on the House Natural Resources Committee, now holds the same position at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.



■ **Elizabeth Connolly** is now a legislative assistant to Jon Tester of Montana. She was an economics policy adviser to another Senate Democrat, Gary Peters of Michigan.

