

PUBLIC LIVES

For a Lawyer Who's Angry, a Gotti Is Therapy

By Robin Finn

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SURE, there are strait-laced members of society who regard Jeffrey Lichtman, New York City's criminal lawyer du jour thanks to this month's twinkle-toed defense of John A. Gotti, as, in Mr. Lichtman's unsolicited yet helpful opinion, "the ultimate bottom-feeder -- in their eyes, you're a piece of garbage by association."

In his case, an articulate piece of garbage wearing high-end clothes and barking instructions to colleagues assisting with Mr. Gotti's bail arrangements. Mr. Lichtman is the very essence of voluntary agita. "Come on, I'm a Type B personality," he insists.

He's nothing of the sort, not even when mellowing out in his down time with his vintage baseball card collection. Told that his voice contains a built-in harangue, he positively beams. "I'm an angry guy, and this profession provides a tremendous opportunity to channel it in a positive way instead of, say, kicking the dog." (For the record, Mr. Lichtman is angry because his parents, who never let him have a dog, divorced when he was 14; he loves his Shih Tzu, Calvin.) "Hey, I don't like lawyers, either. Who does? They're argumentative, and they think they know more than everyone else."

To say that Mr. Lichtman, 40, who compares his zoned-in performance in the Gotti trial to Sitting Bull's at the Little Bighorn -- put on the war paint, feel impervious to the enemy's bullets, then smoke them on the cross-examination -- is basking in his Gotti association is an understatement.

Getting a Gotti sprung from a handful of racketeering charges? The word on the street was that it was a Sisyphean undertaking. "The symbolic value of it is that when it's a Gotti case, the name alone is enough to convict you. I was working like three people because I didn't want to embarrass myself. Where else would I get an opportunity on a stage like this? It's not like I think Gotti is this innocent little guy; I'm not a fool. But the government was going after him like he's their Moby-Dick."

Mr. Lichtman, unsurprisingly, was no fan of the mob turncoats the prosecution engaged as witnesses: "Arrogant." They reminded him, he says, of the bullies he grew up with in Clark, N.J., where his father was a meatpacker and fistfights trumped schoolyard conversations. After one government witness, Michael DiLeonardo, known as Mikey Scars, responded to his scathing cross-examination by cocking a finger in his direction and miming a gunshot, Mr. Lichtman ratcheted up his own arrogance. "It's a good thing that finger wasn't loaded," he remarked to the trial judge, Shira A. Scheindlin.

HE says he told Mr. Gotti, with whom he bonded over a shared love of family (Mr. Gotti says his five children are the reason he has estranged himself from Gambino family fare) and cowboys-and-Indians trivia, that he couldn't guarantee victory, just an impassioned battle. "I said: 'I'm fighting for me and for you. I know it sounds selfish, but at least it's honest.'"

Fifteen flights up in a disheveled Midtown office whose decorating scheme is best described as self-ransacked, he cares little about public hang-ups on his choice of clientele. Goody-two-shoes types don't interest him: "I'd say the line of innocent defendants out my door is very short."

Vulnerability does intrigue him, and after 14 years in the criminal defense trenches, including a six-year apprenticeship with Gerald R. Shargel, he finds it in strange places, or rather, in strange persons: the professional wrestler Ultimate Warrior, the rapper The Game and Mr. Gotti, aka Junior.

Last week a federal jury returned a deadlocked verdict on the main extortion and racketeering charges against Mr. Gotti, who among other transgressions was accused of ordering the 1992 kidnapping of the Guardian Angel Curtis Sliwa. This week, after seven years in prison and a six-week trial, Mr. Gotti was released on \$7 million bail. Mr. Lichtman cried with relief. And exhaustion.

Just after Mr. Gotti's indictment, Mr. Lichtman's wife, Nance, gave birth, prematurely, to twin boys; medical complications kept them at Mount Sinai Hospital for 63 days. He shuttled between the prison and the hospital. Didn't get a decent night's sleep for months. Now the boys are healthy, and Mr. Lichtman rented a Hamptons house for this week. But two days into his vacation he was back in court arguing for Mr. Gotti's bail. "I have the rest of my life to relax," he says.

And how does his wife put up with this workaholic? "She's from Wisconsin," he says.

When Mr. Lichtman met Mr. Gotti in 1992, while working on a brief for Michael Kennedy, a defense lawyer who represented Mr. Gotti's father, he felt no bond. Where the father was, yes, dapper, the son was surly and uncommunicative. "Scary. He didn't strike me as a warm and fuzzy." And now? "He's a sweet guy."

For a guy whose own father, disappointed by his decision to drop out of Emory University's pre-med program after an unpleasant confrontation with a fetal pig, once told him he "wasn't shifty enough" to become a lawyer, Mr. Lichtman, who graduated from Duke University School of Law, is thriving. Though he did lose an apartment he had hoped to buy on East 75th Street once its board learned of his, ah, connections: "What did they think, I'd be holding Gambino family meetings in the common areas?" So he's moving to Westchester. Even fantasizing about opening an animal shelter. Well, maybe not.