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HE'S DEFENDING EL CHAPO, BECAUSE HARVEY WEINSTEIN WOULD BE TOO EASY

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Beca

By Nick Fouriezos
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Decades before he became the lawyer for accused gang leaders John Gotti Jr. and [El Chapo](#), Jeffrey Lichtman was standing over a dissected pig, wondering what the hell he was doing. In that moment of clarity, the stink of formaldehyde in the air, the Jewish kid from New Jersey realized he would much rather be a lawyer than the doctor his father wanted him to be. So he walked out of class and called his dad, who said he was making a mistake and that he wasn't "shifty enough," Lichtman, now 53, recalls before quipping: "He was a meat-packer, so I'm not sure how qualified he was to know what a good [criminal](#) defense lawyer would be."

Always the contrarian — he says movie mogul and #MeToo flash point Harvey Weinstein is clearly not guilty of sexual assault — Lichtman is still fueled by his critics, despite being listed as a New York "Super Lawyer" and receiving the highest ratings possible in his profession. Instead of his pops, his perceived doubters are now judges, lawyers and government officials who call his clients garbage. "It ends up building some residual anger," he says. Those clients have included rappers Fat Joe and the Game, an abortion doctor whose patient died and a cop facing corruption charges. Most famously, Lichtman helped Gotti Jr. walk free after a 2005 trial on kidnapping and



Fat Joe, left, whose real name is Joseph Cartagena, leaves court with Lichtman in Newark, New Jersey, on Dec. 20, 2012.

SOURCE [SAMANTHA HENRY](#)

The alleged Mexican drug lord and head of the Sinaloa Cartel faces federal drug trafficking charges. His trial begins with jury selection on Monday in New York. Lichtman's work is driven by fury, sure. But it's also driven by professional pride. "You're looking for the ultimate challenge," he says. "Why else get out of bed in the morning?" In fact, Lichtman seeks out the cases others call unwinnable rather than cases that are high-profile but "aren't especially difficult to win," Lichtman says. The example he gives: Weinstein, whose case also will hit New York courts this month. "Everybody knows these people were sleeping with him for favors. The case is

MEXICO IS A COMPLETELY CORRUPT STATE. ... I DON'T BELIEVE A WORD THEY SAY ABOUT GUZMÁN.

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Wish granted. Years
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prosecution says is necessary to keep them safe. Lichtman unsuccessfully argued that could prejudice the jurors (making them think El Chapo is violent, and therefore guilty) and make it nearly impossible to suss out whether the witnesses are credible. “The amount of evidence and just the breadth of the government case temporally, the amount of years, the scope of it — that’s a difficult case” for the defense, says Theresa Van Vliet, a partner at Genovese Joblove & Battista and former chief of narcotics at the U.S. Department of Justice.

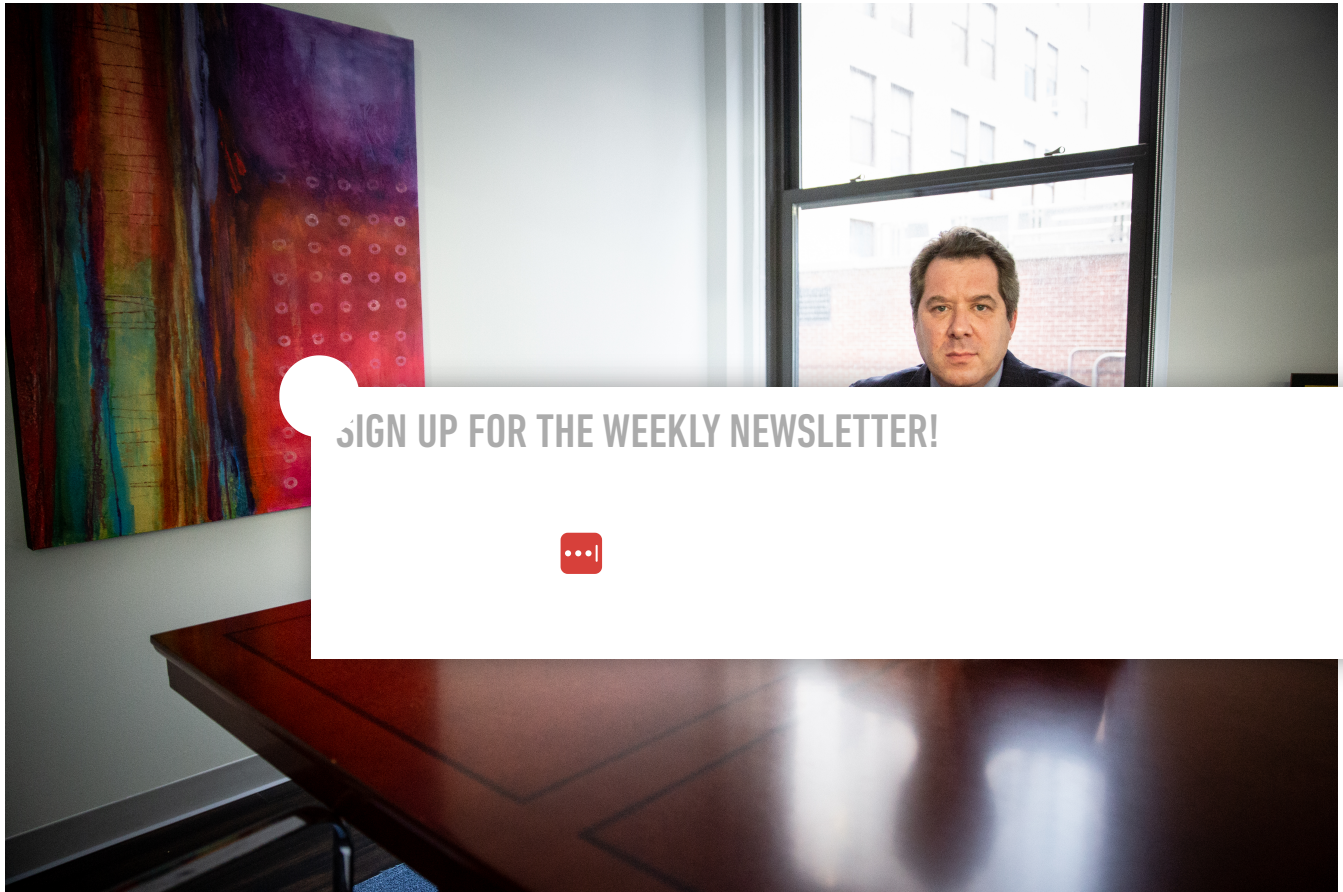
Guzmán is in solitary confinement in a Manhattan jail nicknamed “Little Gitmo,” having already escaped two high-security prisons in Mexico. That makes Lichtman’s task even more challenging because he can’t review the thousands of pages of evidence with his client through a glass pane. “There is a feeling that a conviction is a *fait accompli*, that it will be impossible to find an open-minded jury and there will be a tremendous amount of attention,” Lichtman says.



Lichtman has seen such obstacles before, primarily with the son of infamous Big Apple mob boss John Gotti. Lichtman proved his mettle, says former Southern District of New York judge Shira Scheindlin, who presided over that case, which ended in a hung jury and his client’s freedom. “He was a good lawyer and he painted his client sympathetically. I remember Lichtman being very likable — he very passionately made the argument that the government was overreaching,” Scheindlin says.

Lichtman successfully cast doubt on the qualifications of the witnesses, many of whom were incarcerated **gang** members testifying with hopes of having their sentences reduced. As Lichtman brags on his website, media reports described his cross-examination as a “relentless pounding” where witnesses were “put through the blender” and “shredded.” His strategy remains the same.

“Mexico is a completely corrupt state, from the top to the bottom, every aspect of law enforcement. I don’t believe a word they say about Guzmán,” Lichtman says. He will paint his client — never the cartel leader portrayed by prosecutors, Lichtman insists — as more legitimate than the witnesses, not unlike his past high-profile defense. Gotti



Yet Van Vliet points out that for El Chapo the government will complement its witnesses with additional hard evidence — phone calls, plane tickets, etc. “Look, international cartel leaders hang out with other criminals ... there is no other way to do it,” she says.

Lichtman says he doesn’t “give a damn” what the public might think about his decision to defend infamous men. But while he talks tough, he presents an amicable air in court. “He had a pleasant style: not flamboyant, not overly confrontational, but very organized,” Scheindlin says. Under the tutelage of legendary New York lawyer Jerry Shargel for his first six years out of Duke Law School, Lichtman learned that you couldn’t be all bark. “If you don’t have a good sense of humor, you’re in pretty deep shit,” he says. If he pulls another stunner with El Chapo, Lichtman will have a last laugh to savor.

[Nick Fouriezos](#), OZY Author

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