

NEWS

COP-SLAY ACTOR HIRES BIG-TIME ATTORNEY

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344 words

25 September 2006

[New York Daily News](#)

SPORTS FINAL

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English

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"SOPRANOS" ACTOR Lillo Brancato has hired legal bulldog Joseph Tacopina to defend him against charges he killed an off-duty cop during a drug-fueled Bronx burglary.

Brancato, 29, an actor whose star rose in Robert De Niro's film "A Bronx Tale" and HBO's "The Sopranos," had been represented by attorney Mel Sachs, who died of cancer last month at 60.

Tacopina said he is convinced his client is innocent of the murder and burglary charges in the December slaying of Bronx cop Daniel Enchautegui.

"After doing my own investigation and fact-finding in the case, I'm convinced he was not committing any crime that night," said Tacopina, who will make his first appearance in court at the actor's side today.

"If I thought Lillo had anything to do with the death of this off- duty police officer, I wouldn't have taken the case. That is how confident I am in this case."

The hero cop was responding to a break-in at a neighbor's home when he was shot and killed during a gun battle with Brancato's alleged triggerman accomplice, Steven Armento.

The brave cop shot Brancato and Armento, 48, before he collapsed and died from bullets that pierced his heart.

Tacopina contends his client "was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Bronx District Attorney Robert Johnson's office declined to respond to Tacopina's comment. "We don't litigate in the media," said a spokesman. "We litigate in the courtroom."

Tacopina has represented his fair share of high-profile clients, including disgraced ex-Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik, curvaceous rap star Foxy Brown and teenage hottie Diana Bianchi, who admitted she was the love interest of Christie Brinkley's philandering husband, Peter Cook.

Enchautegui, who was posthumously promoted to detective, was honored by Mayor Bloomberg and Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly last month as a Pelham Bay streetcorner was renamed Detective Daniel Enchautegui Way.

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Caption: Lillo Brancato

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