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Opposite positions, equal in purpose

Awe of justice brings 'Court TV' to New Brunswick for murder trial

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Joseph Tacopina enters the courtroom with confidence, wearing a suit of fine Italian fabric.

A New York attorney with a celebrity client roster, he is accustomed to the spotlight, continually angling to win favor with the judge and jurors.

Over the next several weeks, Tacopina will face prosecutor Patricia Prezioso, an understated yet driven attorney from the state Attorney General's Office.

She is determined to prove that his client, Melanie McGuire, killed her husband, chopped up his body and discarded the remains in matching suitcases, later found in the Chesapeake Bay area.

As an assistant attorney general, Prezioso's client is technically the state of New Jersey, which took over the murder investigation from Virginia Beach, Va., authorities. But, she says, she also is there for the one person in the case who cannot speak for himself – William T. McGuire, last seen alive April 28, 2004.

During the first week of the high-profile murder trial, Prezioso has intentionally kept her back to the audience and cameras crammed inside the New Brunswick courtroom.

"The work that I do, it's for the victims, it's for the crime victims statewide. There're very few people in a position to help them," she said.

The skills of these two highly touted attorneys could prove crucial in what is largely a circumstantial prosecution.

Though William McGuire was shot twice before he was dismembered, no murder weapon has been recovered. And while prosecutors claim he was cut apart at the couple's Woodbridge apartment, no blood evidence was found.

Prezioso, who took on the case voluntarily, has a degree in biology with a minor in chemistry. She also headed New Jersey's program to collect DNA samples from 120,000 state prison inmates.

"There is no lawyer better than her in that courtroom," said Peter Harvey, former state attorney general, who recruited Prezioso in 2002 from the Manhattan District Attorney's Office. "She probably knows more about DNA evidence (than) any lawyer on the East Coast."

So far, Prezioso has been methodical in her approach to revealing evidence. Her demeanor is energetic, but her delivery is controlled, her hands always firmly placed on the lectern during questioning.

Prosecuting cases is part of her identity, having served nearly 15 years as an assistant district attorney in New York.

Tacopina also launched his career on the prosecution side of the table in the Brooklyn District Attorney's Office. But his defense practice has made him a brand name. He made big news in the Abner Louima police-brutality case in New York by winning an acquittal for officer Thomas Wiese.

Recently featured in the men's magazine "GQ," Tacopina prefers tailored suits cut from Italian fabrics of his choosing.

McGuire's family hired the high-priced Tacopina as scrutiny of the case intensified. The trial is being broadcast live on "Court TV."

Tacopina said he took the case because he believes McGuire is innocent.

"When you have something where people are watching, and the outside is interested, you've got to show the system is important and is something that is worth the awe people give it," he said.

Tacopina rejects the criticism that comes with involvement in big-money cases.

"I don't think you can buy justice," he said, "but you can buy a complete and thorough defense."

When Tacopina speaks, he owns the courtroom. His cross-examinations in the first week resembled a prizefighter drawing witnesses into traps for the overhand right – all delivered with drama for the jury.

"Joe knows when to have his moments," said fellow celebrity attorney and legal analyst Mickey Sherman. "There're TV lawyers and real lawyers. Being good at both is rare."

During the trial, Tacopina is always next to McGuire, watching the proceedings and whispering in her ear. His defense partner Stephen Turano focuses on his legal notepad, checking his notes.

"It's a good defense team," said Morristown attorney Michael Pedicini, who has worked with Turano and Tacopina. "I'd want them on my side if I were in trouble."

A native of West Orange, Turano practices in New York and New Jersey. His career highlights include representing financier Robert E. Brennan and winning a rare evidence-suppression hearing that ultimately freed his client.

But defending McGuire is his highest-profile case by far, he said. Turano presented the defense's opening arguments.

"Cases like these come around once in a lifetime," said Turano, who invited his father to watch his opening last week. "Almost like what athletes do – you try to enjoy the moment because it may not happen again."

Prezioso's partner is Deputy Attorney General Christopher S. Romanyshyn. His specialty in the case centers on the scientific evidence and forensic testimony expected to unfold. Romanyshyn joined the state Attorney General's Office eight years ago.

"I made the active choice to leave (private practice) and come into a prosecutor's role," he said. "This is the place where I can do the most good and put the training that I have to the best use."

Romanyshyn has spent the majority of his time in the attorney general's Organized Crime and Racketeering Bureaus, gaining a specialty in electronic surveillance. Recently, he co-prosecuted an arson ringleader who was sentenced to 72 years in prison, and he won racketeering convictions in an ATM scam that spanned seven counties.

Though the four seasoned attorneys are at odds in the courtroom, they sometimes share light moments once the jurors leave and the cameras are turned off. But the case has not been without moments of tension.

"It's just as noble to be a defense attorney as it is to be a prosecutor," said Tacopina. "You cannot tell me there's a responsibility that's more awesome, more substantial, than representing someone in the fight for

their life and their liberty."

With the potential for a wide cable audience on "Court TV," Turano said he hopes the case remains focused on justice, and not personalities.

"I think when we all step back, at the end of each day, hopefully it's not that personal," Turano said.

"But I do think we have some fundamental differences, because the stakes are so high, because we're so diametrically opposed in our positions."

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