

# Irwin family lawyer is no stranger to the spotlight

BY MARK MORRIS  
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The New York lawyer who dropped so suddenly this week into the case of a missing infant turns out to be a hard-charging attorney who often does very good things for clients.

Joseph Tacopina, 45, may not be a household name in Kansas City, but he's well-known in the Empire State.

Tacopina has burnished a string of high-profile courtroom victories as a criminal defense lawyer by also working as a legal commentator and analyst on cable and network television news programs.

Tacopina held court for Kansas City reporters for about 45 minutes Monday, announcing that he would be representing Deborah Bradley and Jeremy Irwin during the investigation of their daughter's disappearance. By the next morning he was on network news shows discussing the case.

Lisa Irwin, now 11 months old, vanished from her parents' home this month, sparking a huge local investigation and a torrent of national publicity. Although police and federal investigators have not identified a suspect, Bradley has said she expects to be arrested in the case.

Should that be the case, Bradley might have found the lawyer who could both resolve legal issues in her favor and sustain the spotlight on the case so everyone would know about it.

"If this case is brought into the criminal justice system, it is going to be a very vigorous defense," Tacopina told The Star in an interview Tuesday afternoon.

A former Brooklyn prosecutor, Tacopina began his defense career helping police officers who found themselves on the other side of the law. From that he built a record of success representing other high-profile defendants, including Joran van der Sloot, a Dutch teenager who was a suspect in the disappearance of Natalee Holloway in Aruba.

He defended van der Sloot and his father in a civil case brought by Holloway's family. A judge threw the case out.

(Joran van der Sloot currently faces unrelated murder charges in Peru.)

He also won acquittals of a New York police officer accused of torturing Abner Louima, a Haitian immigrant, and Lillo Brancato, an actor appearing on HBO's "The Sopranos" who was accused of felony murder of an off-duty police officer.

In May, Tacopina won an acquittal on rape charges for one of two New York police officers accused of assaulting a drunken woman after helping her to her apartment.

Tacopina said Tuesday that he didn't think authorities would charge Bradley or Irwin, but added he was ready if they did.

Although Tacopina's appearance in the case sparked an epidemic of head-scratching among local lawyers, several said Tuesday that he'd already accomplished a lot if he'd convinced his clients to quit speaking to reporters.

"All he could do is what a first-year lawyer could do: Tell the client to quit appearing on all the national talk shows and talking about the case," said Mike Yonke, a criminal defense attorney.

Early on, family spokespeople said Deborah Bradley would speak only to national media outlets. On Monday she admitted on NBC's "Today" show that she had been drinking the night Lisa disappeared. Fox News later broadcast an interview in which Bradley admitted that she'd been drunk.

She also rearranged the timeline of Lisa's disappearance, telling "Today" that she put the baby to bed about four hours earlier than when she told police.

Tacopina said those discrepancies had not shaken his belief that Bradley was innocent, a view he said he came to hold after spending seven to 10 days speaking with the family and consulting with investigator Bill Stanton, a friend who since has stepped back from the case.

"It's the sort of case I like to get involved in," Tacopina said. "You have a mother and father who are really very sweet, caring people. To me it was why I went to law school."

Attorneys also said an outside lawyer might be able to deal more easily with a community's reaction to representing a defendant charged with a crime against a child.

Yonke said that though everyone deserves a good defense, the nature of crimes against children can cause lawyers to become skittish.

"When you're dealing with children in this kind of community, some attorneys would think twice about their involvement," Yonke said. "This is a small town."

Lawyer Susan Hunt has been through that fire. She represented Keith Nelson, who was sentenced to death for the 1999 kidnapping and killing of 10-year-old Pamela Butler of Kansas City, Kan. Hunt recalled Tuesday that while she defended Nelson she faced death threats and had to work through her own revulsion with his conduct.

"They were hard-pressed to find someone to represent Nelson," Hunt said. "There were a lot of people who turned it down."

Indeed, Tacopina said he wouldn't have accepted the case if he suspected that Lisa's parents had anything to do with her disappearance. But he said he was not concerned how people viewed him.

"I don't set out to make friends," said Tacopina, who has declined to say who's paying for his services. "I'm not a politician. I'm not running for office. I'm representing people in the most important moments in their lives."



Rich Sugg

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