

NEWS

LEGAL BIG AIDS TEEN LOVER IN CHRISTIE SPLIT

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TEENAGE BOMBSHELL Diana Bianchi says she's an innocent victim exploited by Christie Brinkley's philandering husband Peter Cook - but she's taking no risks when it comes to defending herself.

The 19-year-old paramour in the middle of Cook and Brinkley's bitter bustup has one of New York's fiercest defenders fighting in her corner. Legal bulldog **Joseph Tacopina** has represented high-profile defendants in some of the city's most compelling cases, including former Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik and shamed New York Post writer Jared Paul Stern.

It was **Tacopina's** experience in the limelight that convinced Bianchi's family to hire him.

"This girl is caught in the middle of a major tabloid event," **Tacopina** said. "She's a little overwhelmed and she's scared. Hers isn't even really a case. I'm here to protect her rights."

That protection, he says, does not involve keeping Bianchi away from the tabloid storm launched by accusations of her affair with Brinkley's husband, 47.

She has conducted press interviews, painting herself as a young victim lured from a high school job and manipulated into the year-long affair that is now tearing apart Cook and Brinkley's 10-year relationship.

"The media is part of what we do," **Tacopina** said. "I think it's foolish not to be upfront and open with the media if you're dealing with a high-profile case.

"The clients come to me because, in part, they need someone with experience dealing with the press."

Tacopina, 40, is a former assistant district attorney in his home borough of Brooklyn.

He came to prominence representing NYPD Officer Thomas Wiese, accused of giving false statements to investigators looking into accusations of police brutality involving Haitian immigrant Abner Louima. Against expectations, he won Wiese's acquittal.

Since then, **Tacopina** has won nearly every one of his 80 cases.

His connections with the police force, he says, led to him being contacted by Bianchi, whose stepfather is a cop. But he also takes on civil cases - including recently agreeing to represent the family of slain graduate student Imette St. Guillen.

"We do a significant amount of victim's rights work," he said. "[Bianchi] is one. This young girl is a victim."

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Caption: **Joseph Tacopina**

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