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New York Brief Q&A with Dan Nardello

By Mike Vilensky

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Daniel Nardello was a Manhattan federal prosecutor from 1987 to 1994 and is now executive chairman of investigations firm Nardello & Co.

He helped recover assets after Sam Bankman-Fried's crypto exchange, FTX, collapsed. (The Guardian then described his firm as "spies for hire who pick the bones of corporate scandal.")

More recently, Nardello investigated right-wing pundit Candace Owens on behalf of French President Emmanuel Macron and French first lady Brigitte Macron, ahead of their lawsuit against Owens, Nardello told me. His work on that case continues. (The Macrons' attorney confirmed Nardello's work.)

The Macrons allege Owens defamed them with a "relentless and unjustified smear campaign" calling Brigitte Macron a man, among other false comments.

Owens has moved to dismiss the suit as "baseless," arguing that she has First Amendment protections and accusing the Macrons of engaging in "libel tourism" after filing in Delaware.

Over Zoom from his art-filled 6th Avenue office, Nardello told me why Freud is "the reasonable person" and where he goes for a Midtown lunch.

Do you consider yourself a spy?

DN: No. Most of what we do is in the open light of day. My background is as a lawyer, so we're focused on developing facts and corroborating them and supporting them. I don't think of myself as a spy.

Even if it sounds cool?

DN: At 68, I'm not looking to be cool.

What did you learn at SDNY that's helped you as an investigator?

DN: How to develop information, how to speak to witnesses, the importance of corroboration. And of course, how trials play out. I understand the rules of evidence. So when we're doing our work, particularly with disputes, I'm attuned to how the information that we uncover is going to be used at trial.

Why give up being a trial attorney?

DN: I didn't make an affirmative decision to give it up. When I was leaving the US Attorney's office, I fell in love with a Roman psychoanalyst. I decided for a variety of reasons, including the fact that I was in love with a Roman, that I wanted to live and work in Italy.

That decision put me into this business, and I really enjoyed it. My life took on a different trajectory. So don't underestimate falling in love, and what it can do for your career.

What makes someone a good investigator?

DN: Tenacity and curiosity. Intellectual rigor. An instinct. And an enjoyment of finding things out.

What are the Macrons like as clients?

DN: They're absolutely lovely. The fact that they put their principles on the line for this made the case that much more compelling.

Are you hoping this case has a broader public policy impact?

DN: The nature of people who throw around allegations like this is that there's a certain incorrigibility to it. So I'd like to be hopeful, but I'm reality-based.

On that note, which actual person, living or dead, do you consider "the reasonable person"?

DN: I think it is Sigmund Freud, even though he dealt mostly in fantasy and people's fantasies. But there is an underlying reasonableness and common sense approach to Freud that I think would make him qualified for that.

He's someone you'd want on a jury?

DN: Well, that's a different question.

What book is on your bedside table?

DN: I'm reading three things, and not doing as good a job as I should on any of them. One is "Suite Française" by Irène Némirovsky. She was Russian, moved to France, and wrote this beautiful book which is a real time account of life in France under the German occupation. The novel, published posthumously, came to an abrupt end because she was killed in Auschwitz. I'm also reading "A Voyage Around the Queen" by Craig Brown, which is a very funny compilation. And then I'm rereading Proust, "In Search of Lost Time." I have a Proust tutor.

Light reading?

DN: There's an avoidance anxiety with Proust, because it's so long, but it's actually quite accessible. It's not like "Ulysses." There's a level of social satire that's really sharp and very funny. But it's not a quick read. You need patience and you need time. Both are in short supply for most people, including myself.

When you were a prosecutor, where'd you go for lunch?

DN: If I was on trial, I was having lunch at my desk. If I wasn't on trial, I used to go to The Odeon, which I still go to. I've been going there for over 40 years, and my appreciation for it was only enhanced because I just read Keith McNally's book, "I Regret Almost Everything." Terrific read.

And your spot now?

DN: Since I'm in Midtown and I'm not down by the courts as much, I go to Aretsky's Patroon. It's a terrific restaurant run by adults, for adults.

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