

Sex, Lies and Audiotape

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By Terry Spencer Hesser

As the daughter of the late internationally famous high-profile private investigator Ernie Rizzo, Tracy Rizzo knows the value of being able to walk through locked doors. Her childhood would have made Harriet the Spy green with envy. Quality time with her father frequently included a little undercover work on the way to countless family dinners. Dad's briefcase contained tape recorders and microphones instead of file folders or ledgers. And then there were those diplomatic phone calls she made for him late at night. In short, after an adolescence spent learning how to acquire information without arousing suspicion and sorting out truth from lies, Tracy knows the importance of meticulous inquiry, discreet diplomacy and careful evaluation—skills that most divorce lawyers rely on others to contribute.

Today, as the owner of her own legal firm located in downtown Chicago, Rizzo is anything but inconspicuous. Tall, beautiful and self-assured, Rizzo, 36, exudes a unique combination of high-heeled working-class cool and composed, competent sisterly concern as she guides her clients (many of whom are extremely high-profile) through a process characterized by pain, confusion and doubt.

But for all of her good qualities, Rizzo isn't somebody you want to meet—unless you have to. And if you do meet her, you sense her sizing you up from the moment she lays eyes on you or listens to your story on the phone. Like a bat, Tracy listens to things apart from words; things that aren't said. To pauses. Hesitations. Rushes of emotion. And she watches like a human surveillance camera. Although her father passed away a year ago, his spirit is alive and well, possibly even whispering in his daughter's by now very well-trained ear.

1. What was it like growing up with a famous P.I. for a father? Our house was investigation central. 24/7.
2. How did that influence you? It became innate to me to question people's sincerity and motives. I think that's a useful tool in divorce cases, where often it is a "he said/she said" situation.
3. How did you learn from your Dad? We would go out to dinner every Sunday, but more often than not, we'd have to stop to survey the activity around a house for a while. My dad was so intuitive. Once we were in the Jewel parking lot waiting for my mother to finish shopping and he said to me, "That guy is going to steal something," and sure enough, he did. I think I have some of that but he was the master.
4. Did you have an unusual career trajectory? I was an apprentice private investigator in high school, studied political science at Rosary College (now Dominican University) and worked as an intern in the Investigations Department of the Illinois Attorney General's Office for a while before going to John Marshall Law School.
5. Aren't you young to have your own law firm? After law school I worked for Enrico Mirabelli, whom I had clerked for before that. But after six years of doing exclusively law, I felt like I had twenty under my belt.
6. What are your unique abilities? I can help a judge see my client's position. Fifty percent of divorce law is knowing the law, and the other fifty is presenting your client in the best possible light.
7. What are the negative effects your profession has on you personally? I'm a negative, cynical person who sees the worse in people. I see the half-empty glass.
8. . . . the loss of your father? Since he died, I have had dozens of people tell me that even when they weren't paying him, he was always there to help

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everybody. Social class didn't matter to him and money didn't really matter. He must have been exhausted.

9. He made quite an impression on you? Nobody has ever made the impression on me that he has. And now that he is gone, there is a huge void. I don't think I realized how much I am like him until he died. Now I realize that like him, I say what's on my mind. I'm very direct and to the point.

10. Isn't that a good thing? I always have to be right. I don't back down. Unless, of course, I'm proven wrong.

11. Everyone seems to have seen you on television talking about a foreskin. What was that about? My client's 9-year-old son was having severe infections. Under her particular divorce decree, all major medical decisions for the child had to be agreed upon jointly.

12. What are you working on now? I am representing a former NFL player who has had to obtain an order of protection because his ex-girlfriend was stalking and harassing him.

13. What if we flipped this and you were representing her? I would tell her to stay away from him, get psychiatric help and move on with her life.

14. Divorce cases are emotional. People act crazy. Have you ever been personally threatened? I have received death threats from the boyfriend of a client's ex-wife, along with my client, his current wife—and his kid.

15. So when you read about famous people in the press—R. Kelly, for instance—do you think, boy, I'd love to represent him? Or her. Although I don't believe they have filed a petition for divorce yet, as is common among famous people. In high profile cases, people usually don't file until the day that they get divorced. All of the negotiations are done off the public record to maintain their privacy.

16. Cases with kids must be difficult. International cases with kids involved are the most difficult. I once represented the father, an Italian citizen whose American wife decided to leave him and Italy behind but take their child who was born in Italy with her. We had to file a Hague petition in federal court to have his rights considered. We won. The court found that the mother wrongly removed the child from Italy, ordered the child back to Italy for divorce and custody proceedings. I got an award from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children from the State Department.

17. Are you divorced? No. I'm married, but I don't like to talk about my personal life. I think it cheapens it. I'm not advertising.

18. What's your take on those racy billboards featuring women in thongs and push-up bras and men with six-pack abs accompanied by the slogan "Life's short. Get a divorce."? I believe there was a consensus among divorce attorneys in Chicago that that billboard was an embarrassment to our profession and borderline unethical. Furthermore, I think all advertising is unnecessary in this business, let alone prurient advertising . . . Dad [Ernie Rizzo] referred business to me in the beginning, and I have now come to believe that referral is the best way to develop clients. Our job as divorce lawyers is to help people who have chosen to get divorced. Our job isn't to encourage divorce. It's the most tasteless thing I have ever seen a divorce lawyer do.

19. You don't think it's funny? I don't think divorce is funny. And I don't think that people who think it's funny are people who are serious about divorce. The ad got the attention she apparently needs. That's all I have to say.

20. How important is it to have a good attorney in a divorce? Let me put it this way: when it comes to divorce, it's only your whole life, your business and your children that are affected.

*Note: Tracy Rizzo is licensed to practice law in the State of Illinois. The above, therefore, references Illinois law.

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