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to representing
Donald Trump,
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did it his way

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Doing, Working, Hustling

Michael Sirota went from delivering eggs to representing The Donald

BY PATRICK PAWLING PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUIGI CIUFFETELLI

THERE ARE A FEW THINGS YOU MIGHT notice about Michael Sirota upon first meeting him. Like the beautiful corner office, the confident eyes, the warm voice. And, of course, the bow tie.

Sirota, the co-managing shareholder at Hackensack-based Cole Schotz, is a formidable litigator, but his style is often more pragmatic than table-pounding. He can brawl with the best, but when he and his bow tie enter a case, odds are the judge will be pleased, the client will be happy and the resolution will be hastened.

Since joining the firm in 1987, Sirota has arguably become *the man* when it comes to bankruptcy. In and out of court, he has helped restructure billions of dollars of distressed debt.

His client list includes some big names with famous manes: American Pharoah and Donald Trump. One never talks, and the other doesn't stop talking.

American Pharoah, the racehorse owned and bred by Ahmed Zayat, won the Triple Crown last year as well as the Breeders' Cup Classic. In 2010, Sirota helped Zayat successfully complete a Chapter 11 reorganization after a bank tried to foreclose on his horses.

One of Sirota's more memorable cases with Trump, whose business entities he's represented multiple times, was in 2015 as litigation counsel to Trump AC Casino Marks in a state court action to terminate a trademark and licensing agreement to Trump Entertainment Resorts, Trump Plaza and Trump Taj Mahal. After those entities filed Chapter 11 in U.S. Bankruptcy Court in Delaware, Sirota moved for emergent relief from an automatic stay, conducted expedited discovery and successfully obtained stay relief. The stay relief in turn enabled Sirota and Trump to proceed with New Jersey litigation to terminate the license agreement, which led to a quick settlement.

Hard-driving clients fit Sirota's style: The higher the stakes, the more he likes it. "Representing both of them was an absolutely fantastic experience," says Sirota. "I've been blessed with representing some very high net-worth, very high-profile clients, and from my perspective, they all have some common DNA."

Michael Cohen, special counsel for Trump, recalls when a significant matter arose on a holiday weekend. "Mr. Sirota resolved it within 24 hours—something no one believed was possible." Adds Cohen, "Mike is universally described as the premier bankruptcy attorney in the United States."

Donald Steckroth, a former bankruptcy judge now with Cole Schotz, says, "I think judges and the rest of the bankruptcy bar would confirm that he is just a superior lawyer, hard-working and always emphasizing client service. You can see that from the bench. He was always well-prepared. His written materials were excellent and without hyperbole, which is what judges want to see. And when he examines a witness, he is spectacular."

Sirota says that to a large degree, his success is a measure of his relentless preparation and the contributions of a great team. There is no questioning his commitment or work ethic. When he started at Cole Schotz, he made it a point to find out who came in earliest and beat them in—every day. To this day, he still works as hard as a junior associate trying to make partner.

"I have to prepare to the extent that I feel I am the most prepared person in the courtroom, that I fully understand every potential angle and every question that might be asked," he says. "I get highly motivated. It never gets old and you never get accustomed to it. You just can't mail it in, and you can only delegate so much."

FOR MANY IN LAW, MEDICINE AND OTHER

professions, the path is often set early. Professionals tend to produce professionals. This was not so for Sirota. Born in Paterson, raised in Fair Lawn, educated in public schools and raised by a single mother—"my dad had some issues that put him under duress"—Sirota was a good kid who just wasn't particularly focused on school. College? No desire. Not until a guidance counselor at Fair Lawn told his mother vocational school might be a good idea.

"My mom was a demonstrative woman, and when we got in the car, she made it known that vocational school wasn't an option," he says, smiling at the memory. To appease her, he went to Ramapo College. Not that his heart was in it. He had always preferred doing, working, hustling. Along the way he has delivered eggs, helped his mom sell overcoats on the streets of Paterson, fixed bicycles at a shop in Fair Lawn and bartended. His sights weren't high. You get a couple bucks in your pocket and you head down to Atlantic City after closing. For a 20-year-old, this was *living*.

It's easy to get lost in that life. But when Sirota saw one of his old high school friends picking it up academically at Ramapo, something clicked. With his mom working him over about graduate school, and finally having the grades to make it happen, he found himself at Syracuse University College of Law. He graduated as class president.

YOU MIGHT SAY SIROTA WAS RECRUITED

to Cole Schotz directly from a dry cleaning store. It's one of those you-couldn't-script-it episodes: His wife, Miriam, ran into Tobie Garth Meisel, whose husband is Michael Meisel, then a name partner at Cole Schotz Meisel Forman & Leonard. She and Sirota's wife began talking to the owner of the dry cleaning business about the crazy hours Sirota was working in New York City. Meisel told Sirota's wife that Sirota should talk to her husband at Cole Schotz.

Sirota's first thought wasn't positive. He was working on Park Avenue. Why would he want go back to New Jersey? But after one meeting, he decided to take a pay cut and join the firm in Hackensack.

"The pedigree of the firm was astonishing," says Sirota. One of the founders, David Cole, counseled every president from Franklin Roosevelt to Gerald R. Ford on labor issues. Plus there was the smaller-can-be-better narrative: You get more hands-on experience, and you could declare a specialty. Sirota had always been interested in litigation, so he chose bankruptcy. It wasn't quite as sexy then as it is now, but it turned out well. When he first started, middle-market cases were in the \$100 million range. Now it's a cool couple billion.

Sirota theorizes that his middle-class background fueled his success, including his ability to attract clients. When you've come from a different place, having worked difficult physical jobs with people from all walks of life, he says, "you develop a skill set that cannot be taught."

"The people I see who are able to attract clients have a capability that goes beyond pure intellect and pedigree," he says. "The biggest business generators in this office seem to have gotten to their places in the world in ways that were a little bit more unconventional as opposed to being raised by professional parents."

He approaches cases with the patience of a bricklayer: preparing, thinking, carefully layering the case and stepping back to get a high-level perspective. He works for pragmatic solutions rather than burning time and client money arguing pointless details. He can go to the mat, but not for show.

"He will never fight a battle for the sake of a fight—he is goal-oriented," says attorney Warren J. Martin Jr., co-chair of the financial restructuring and bankruptcy department at Morristown's Porzio, Bromberg & Newman who has worked with and against Sirota. "There are not a lot of people who have the whole package. To me, that's not only the quality of written work and verbal presentation. It's common sense, integrity and a bit of a competitive nature."

Sirota used to come in a lot hotter than a "bit" competitive.

"When you're a really young attorney, you take the avenue that your adversaries have to be your bitter enemies—with a ridiculously

aggressive attitude," Sirota says. "You think clients will be overly impressed by that. But I think as you mature as a professional, you find you can get to the exact same place with a cooler, calmer approach. Some of my most bitter enemies as a young lawyer have turned out to be great referral sources and friends."

He sees lawyering as a service industry.

"I don't think professionals or lawyers enjoy a higher place in the world than any other person in the service industries, including anybody who walks in and out of your house to do work," he says. "It's about honestly caring instead of checking a box. You care about their business and you care about them."

In the world of bankruptcy, restructuring and litigation, Sirota thinks about the people behind the corporations and the paperwork. It's the jobs that might be gained or lost. Kids may or may not go to college. Mortgages might not be paid. It's the pressure of the playoffs and that's what he wants. "I have to be in a high-stakes environment in order for my attention to be maintained," he says.

With one son grown and the other in college, the man behind the bow tie lives in New York. From skiing to running to any kind of class you can name, if it involves exercise, Sirota likes it. Look for him early, running in Central Park or on one of the fitness machines at Equinox gym at Rockefeller Plaza.

So why the bow tie? Sirota says the look spoke to him. He's not sure why, but he wound up giving away all his regular ties. "And there I was, a young associate walking around the office in a bow tie. Some reactions were positive, and I'm sure some weren't."

If you'd ask Chad Dale, partner in K&L Gates' Boston office who has worked with and against Sirota, he might say it's tough to react any other way than positively to Sirota. "He is a great lawyer," he says. "He's got all the tools in the toolbox and he can apply them the right way at the right time. He can be your consummate aggressive New Jersey lawyer when he needs to be, and he can be a real diplomat. Whatever his clients need is the tool he brings out. In golf terms, he can hit the drive 375 yards, but he's also great on the greens." [S](#)