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Scott Sigman goes from busting gangs at the DA's office to private practice

LAW & POLITICS

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As a city prosecutor, Scott P. Sigman made waves by bringing WMD charges against drug runners. Now he's employing his trademark intensity at Bochetto & Lentz

by MICHAEL Y. PARK

PORTRAIT BY LUIGI CIUFFETELLI

A close-up portrait of Scott P. Sigman, a man with short brown hair and light-colored eyes, wearing a dark pinstriped suit jacket, a white shirt, and a patterned tie. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is slightly out of focus, showing a white wall with large blue letters, likely 'LAW'.

Great
SCOTT!



Scott Sigman first kissed his future wife in front of the Rose Garden at the White House. "When I think about it now, I laugh," admits Pamela Errico Sigman. Not because the backdrop was unfitting; because it was all too fitting.



Left: Sigman and his wife Pamela.
Above: Great-grandparents Sara and Clarence Bloomberg, who raised Sigman.

The 32-year-old former district attorney is a guy with big ambitions. And by big we mean big. Sixteen hundred Pennsylvania Avenue big.

"District attorney, mayor, congressman, senator, governor ...," he says. "Lynne Abraham, who was assistant district attorney, worked for the redevelopment authority, and is now the district attorney. Ed Rendell, assistant district attorney, went into private practice like I am now and then became the governor. These are people who started out just like I did. To me, everything's possible."

Sigman is a famously diligent lawyer with a penchant for making headlines. Three years ago he became the first prosecutor in Pennsylvania to invoke a weapons-of-mass-destruction law when he brought charges against a family that sold drugs and stockpiled weapons, which delighted cops and disturbed civil rights activists. The charges didn't stick, but the brazen move ensured that everyone in Philadelphia would remember the name Scott Sigman.

Sigman comes from a long line of civil servants. His great-grandfather was a noted Philadelphian who drove one of the first cars in the state and inspected telephone poles during rainstorms for the Pennsylvania Electric Company (PECO).

"He was driving the PECO car one night and they think he had a heart attack and he crashed and died," Sigman says. "So he had one of the first traffic deaths in Philadelphia, too."

Sigman's great-grandfather, Clarence Bloomberg, a deputy tax assessor and player in city politics — he served on several committees and was a block captain during World War II, ensuring that neighbors in his area shut off their lights at night to protect the city against enemy bombardments — had a profound influence on Sigman.

"My great-grandfather was born in 1898, lived through two world wars and the Depression," Sigman says. "I still have his World War I Army blanket that he had over in Europe."

"I remember when I was young seeing a City of Philadelphia stapler on his desk at home. I said, 'You know what? I want to have a City of Philadelphia stapler. I want to be part of the city of Philadelphia. I want to have an office in City Hall under William Penn.' It was the greatest accomplishment I could think of, being a part of this city I love."

And since Sigman's parents and grandparents were largely absent from his childhood, a part of his biography he declines to discuss, Bloomberg and his wife stepped in to raise him. Among the many things Sigman learned from his great-grandfather was the virtue of hard work. From an early age Sigman drove himself hard, both in the classroom and during a series of part-time jobs — first as a gas station mini-market attendant and then as a Center City furniture salesman. The mini-market job brought him into regular contact with a group he'd come to respect deeply.

"Philly cops would come in there, and I'd really get to know them," he says. "I remember one cop, his name was Officer Nixon and he drove car 7-11. It was a joke at the convenience store that he was such a regular and drove car number 7-11. Another cop I met, a guy named Springer, was one of the first guys to get a Glock, back when they were switching over from .38s. I ran into him again later when I was at the D.A.'s office."

When it was time to decide on a college, there was only one city that could possibly lure him from his beloved Philadelphia. "What I liked to do is politics," Sigman says. "So where did I go? D.C."

He joined American University's class of 1998, earning a spot on the dean's list in all but his first year, and interned for U.S. Reps. Curt Weldon and Jon D. Fox. It was there that he met Pamela Errico, a visiting student from Milan. She was drawn to his energy and focus.

"On our first dates, he told me he wanted to go into politics," she says. "That's what attracted me to him: He was convinced that he knew what he wanted to do."

His single-minded nature did manifest itself in bizarre ways, though. His diet, for example.

"When I met Scott he would eat the same things over and over, and me coming from Italy, I had never seen anybody eat like him," she writes via e-mail. "Rice Krispies or Corn Flakes for breakfast, and it had to be Kellogg's. Lunch and dinner was either a turkey sandwich with mustard, plain pizza or a Hot Pocket, and canned soup (minestrone from Progresso) and McDonald's were also in his very limited menu. If we would go out it was steak, mashed potatoes and broccoli. I said to him, 'Honey, if we are going to be together, I can't eat like this.'"

Six months later, when her visa required her to return to Italy, he went with her, surprising her family. On that same trip, during



Sigman learns how to cook meth during training for the Special Narcotics Prosecution Unit of the Philadelphia DA's office.

an overnight jaunt to Venice, he proposed. It was classic Sigman: bold, unorthodox and aggressive.

"Scott likes to surprise people," she says. "Most of the time I don't know how he's thinking, but he's very spontaneous."

They married in October 1996. After college they moved to Philadelphia, where Sigman attended Temple University Law School and became class speaker and editor in chief of the international and comparative law journal. Once he finished law school, he took a job with the city district attorney's office, where he had interned. He was assigned to the Special Narcotics Prosecution Unit.

"His personality? Energetic, to say the least," says Inspector Joe Sullivan, then-commanding officer of Narcotics. "If we got a tip in the middle of the night and started a run on a job and were ready for a search warrant at 3 in the morning, our investigators wouldn't think twice about waking Scott, and Scott would be right there giving us advice, telling us what to get, how to strengthen the warrant."

Pamela remembers those nights vividly. "I used to joke with my friends that his job and his cell phone were his mistress," she says.

The police grew fond of Sigman and treated him like one of their own.

"The guys thought of him as a little brother," Sullivan says. "A police officer would be truly happy to see Scott in court because they knew he'd treat them with respect. They were very comfortable around him. We'd tease him about being a media hound and trying to be a movie star and all that, but always in the best way."

Sigman's shot at stardom came on July 17, 2003, when cops raided the North Philadelphia home of Johnnie, Harry and Benjamin Bellmon. What made the case news wasn't just the 3.5 pounds of pot police found there — it was the arsenal. Officers discovered three grenades, four guns, assault-rifle parts, body armor, sniper suits, 20,000 rounds of ammunition and ammunition-making equipment. The Bellmons were at war with a nearby cocaine dealer, and the violence was escalating.

"When the officers executed a warrant at this property and recovered not only drugs but saw the bullet holes and found the

weapons, they saw disaster in that neighborhood," Sigman says. "So I opened up the crimes code and started going from page one to the end to determine each and every crime I could apply to these individuals."

What he came up with, besides the expected weapons and drugs charges, was a recently passed state law that made possession of weapons of mass destruction a crime. The grenades were inoperable, but Sigman argued that the Bellmons were in the process of making bombs. That was all he needed, he says.

Critics objected that Sigman was going overboard, trivializing terrorism and violating the spirit if not the letter of the law. Sigman countered that whether it was an al-Qaida suicide bomber or a bomb-wielding drug dealer, the people in the densely packed neighborhood lived in terror. In the preliminary hearings, Sigman brought in weapons experts and dozens of community members who said the WMD charges should hold up.

"This was a poor section plagued by crime and poverty and HIV," says community activist C. B. Kimmins, executive director of Mantua Against Drugs, who attended the trial and sentencing. "People there are victimized by crime, substandard housing and substandard medical care. They're trying to survive every day. These folks lived in fear because these rivals could have a shootout and they couldn't do anything about it. These people were ready to testify."

But Judge James Lineberger of the Court of Common Pleas disagreed with Sigman and an earlier judge and tossed out the WMD charges while letting the others stand. The Bellmons were found guilty of all the remaining charges (one son, the mastermind of the operation, got 10 years; his father got five years; the other son got two years).

"For that one block of the city, I've solved the problem," Sigman says. "There is no more drug dealing on that block."

In July 2005, budget cuts forced the district attorney to eliminate Sigman's unit. He chose private practice, joining Bochetto & Lentz, where he focuses on litigation. One of his specialties is representing police officers; he has an ongoing case on behalf of two cops who say they were libeled by a television station that reported that they weren't doing their jobs at the Philadelphia International Airport.

"I chose a firm that is very politically connected," he says. "And I wanted to get the opportunity to represent cops again."

He's also involved with projects for the Philadelphia Bar Association, particularly Law Week programs in which young lawyers take inner-city high school students to watch actual trials.

"Scott's very focused," says Alan Feldman, chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association and managing partner of Feldman, Shepherd, Wohlgeleit, Tanner & Weinstock. "He's absolutely devoted to whatever activity he takes on. Scott has essentially turned the Lawyers in the Classroom project into what it is today."

Sigman's zest for leadership is what has some believing he will end up back in city government someday. Only this time in a different office.

"Scott is going to be mayor," his wife says. "All his friends think he's going to be mayor. I think it. And not just because I'm his wife."

But for now, at least, she is just happy to sleep through the night. "He still works long hours," she says, laughing, "but at least we don't get calls at 3 a.m." ❖