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The woman
DEMANDING
to see
Prince Andrew
in COURT



Interview

Portraits by Stefan Ruiz



‘I don’t know what made him think he could dodge this’

As legal counsel for victims of the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, Sigrid McCawley finds herself at the heart of one of the biggest legal fights of the decade – and pitted against the Duke of York. She talks to Josie Ensor

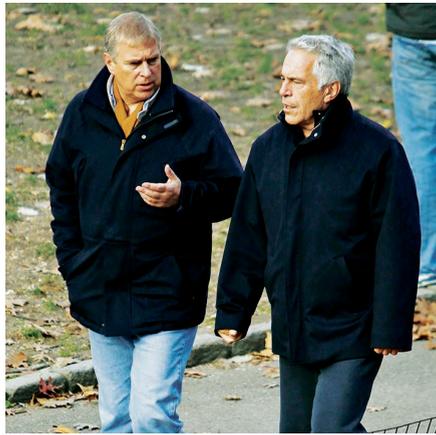
Sitting down for high tea at the Baccarat Hotel in Midtown Manhattan with Sigrid McCawley, it occurs to me that *The American Lawyer* magazine's former 'Litigator of the Year' might just be indulging in a subtle bit of trolling. Before conversation has even turned to the two big cases she has coming up – the civil suit against the Duke of York and the impending criminal trial of Ghislaine Maxwell – I clock the name of our 'quintessentially English' afternoon service: The Prince.

'I don't know what made him think he could dodge this,' McCawley says of the allegations made against the Queen's second son, tapping her black-varnished nails against her cup. 'It has an air of entitlement.'

McCawley has a central role in one of the most highly anticipated and controversial legal fights of the decade – a torrid tale of power and abuse. As counsel for victims of the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, she finds herself pitted against some of the world's most powerful people, including, most recently, the very heart of the British Establishment.

Not that this seems to faze this polished, steely 49-year-old mother of four, who has gained near-celebrity status in America's post-MeToo era. It is, she says between sips of rooibos tea, 'a mission of not allowing those with power and privilege to think they are above the law'.

For McCawley, it all began seven years ago, in 2014, when a woman called Virginia Roberts Giuffre approached her firm, Boies Schiller Flexner, asking for representation. The company's co-founder David Boies assigned McCawley the case, believing she would be the best fit in light of her background. McCawley had long been volunteering with victims of



The Duke of York with Jeffrey Epstein in Central Park, New York, in 2010

abuse and working with children in the foster-care system in Palm Beach, Florida.

She says she instantly felt a motherly instinct towards Giuffre, despite there being just an 11-year age gap between the two. Both women had also just given birth to baby girls – McCawley to her fourth child and first daughter, Madeleine – which, she tells me, gave her added impetus for the fight.

'I remember thinking when we first met just how wounded Virginia was, but at the same time what resilience she had,' says McCawley, clutching at the gold belt on her Gucci dress. 'It was a very difficult story to hear. And of course, a difficult one to tell.'

Giuffre first spoke to the FBI in 2007 as part of its enquiries into Epstein. Two years later, she struck a deal with the financier for undisclosed damages after accusing him of sexual abuse and exploitation. In 2011 she

publicly accused Epstein of abusing her in the late 1990s and early 2000s, for the first time, but she had a hard time getting people to listen (it would be six years before the Harvey Weinstein scandal rocked the US and transformed the national conversation on gender, sex and consent).

When she came to Boies Schiller Flexner in 2014, however, she laid out in detail to McCawley what she claims happened – that Epstein and Maxwell had groomed her when she was a teenager and pimped her out to their circle of high-society friends, including Prince Andrew.

By Giuffre's account, she was flown by private jet to London, the Virgin Islands, New Mexico and Florida, and held as a virtual sex slave. She alleges it was on such trips that she was abused by the Duke, which caused her 'severe and lasting' emotional damage – claims he denies.

It was not just her, she told McCawley over the course of their meetings; there were likely dozens, if not hundreds, of other girls and young women who had been similarly abused over a 15-year period by Epstein and his associates.

McCawley says she believed Giuffre straight away. 'I think with Virginia, I understood it in a way that maybe other people looking at it wouldn't have,' she says, looking me sincerely in the eye. 'Life takes you places for a reason and I think those experiences positioned me to hear that story.'

But she's a lawyer. And she thought to herself that not only would she be taking on one of the most prolific, high-profile sex-trafficking rings in US history – but also the 'most important case of my career'.

In the Baccarat's opulent Grand Salon, McCawley is eyeing the tiered silver cake stand. She defers to me as the resident Brit on matters of afternoon-tea etiquette. 'Is it polite to eat the sandwiches with a fork and knife, or are fingers OK?' she asks. Then there's the question of the order of jam and cream on scones, which I tell her is far too controversial for me to weigh in on.

A native of Florida, McCawley has a certain earnestness that isn't often encountered in the upper echelons of New York's legal world. She appears simultaneously self-doubting and completely sure of herself – a quality that no doubt plays well in front of the hard-nosed judges presiding over her cases.

'Sigrid is exactly what you see – genuine, caring and kind – the real deal,' Natasha Harrison, a managing partner at Boies Schiller Flexner in London, gushes over Zoom. 'It used to be rare to see women like her at the very top, but we've come to understand the value of these traits in our industry now.' Caring and kind she might be, but those who



The Duke, a 17-year-old Virginia Roberts, and Ghislaine Maxwell in 2001



Sigrid McCawley is representing victims of Epstein

have sat across from her in the courtroom also liken her to Uma Thurman's sword-wielding assassin in the *Kill Bill* films. 'Unexpectedly deadly,' one said of her.

The deadliness is something that the Duke of York's legal team has doubtless come up against. In a canny move, Boies Schiller Flexner lodged a lawsuit against the Duke in August, just days before New York state's extension on the window of time that victims had to bring civil action in cases of historic alleged sexual abuse was set to expire.

I ask what McCawley thought of the infamous interview the Duke gave to *Newsnight* about the scandal in late 2019. 'It was shocking, honestly shocking,' she says, without missing a beat. 'I don't know who would have advised him to do that, it was a very wrong move on his part to expose himself in that way. 'But frankly it was very helpful for us.'

The interview was widely considered a car crash. There is an unspoken set of rules governing the Royal family and TV – and Prince Andrew seemed to break them all in a mortify-

ing prime-time segment with Emily Maitlis.

The Queen's third – and reportedly favourite – child said he could not recall ever meeting Giuffre, even when reminded of a photograph of him with his arm around her waist at Maxwell's Belgravia town house. He said her recollection of him dancing sweatily with her at Tramp nightclub when she was 17 years

'For us he's just like any other defendant; there's no excuse regardless of title'

old, in 2001, could not be accurate. He had not perspired, he protested, for decades after his military service in the Falklands, which left him with a condition known as hypohidrosis. And in any case, he said, on the evening in question he had taken one of his daughters to Pizza Express in Woking.

From McCawley's perspective, the interview was gold, akin to being awarded a penalty kick you don't deserve. She says her

team is using it as the basis of its case against the Duke – including the possibility it raises of subpoenaing his ex-wife, Sarah Ferguson, and their daughters, Princesses Beatrice and Eugenie, to attempt to cast doubt on his alibi.

I wonder whether she fully appreciates what uncharted territory her firm is in, suing a member of the British Royal family. The only senior Windsor ever to have faced court is Anne, the Princess Royal, in 2002, when she was fined £500 for failing to stop her bull terrier Dotty from biting two children in Windsor Great Park.

'For us he's just [like] any other defendant; there's no excuse regardless of title or stature,' McCawley says, flexing to fix a stray hair that has fallen from her neat updo. 'If you commit an offence as serious as this you need to be held to account.'

'The facts will come out, and that's the wonderful thing about our justice system here,' she continues primly. Not to mention America's notoriously litigious culture – perhaps why the case is being brought in the US.

The Metropolitan Police announced it would take no further action having carried out a review of claims. But McCawley is vague on why Giuffre never brought civil action in London, one of three locations where the Duke is alleged to have abused the now-38-year-old. 'Without getting into litigation strategy, we were really focused on what we could do in the US. We were tackling it in pieces,' she says, neatly sidestepping my question.

The Duke was given until yesterday to lodge his response to the complaint with the New York court. Both sides were also expected to submit details of their proposed moves on discovery and depositions to judge Lewis Kaplan ahead of a pre-trial hearing this Wednesday.

The Duke's newly hired lawyer Andrew Brettler – a Hollywood attorney who has represented various celebrities accused of sexual misconduct – is hoping to get the case thrown out before it reaches trial. Prince Andrew's legal team argued to gain access to a confidential document they say will exonerate him: they believe Giuffre signed away her right to sue others connected to Epstein in her 2009 settlement. Her original complaint referred to 'royalty, politicians, academicians [and] businessmen', and the settlement was used by Alan Dershowitz, a Harvard law professor and Epstein's former lawyer, to get a similar claim made by Giuffre against him dropped.

But McCawley does not waver. 'Its release, in my view, does not release Andrew from anything,' she says. 'Our case is solid.'

The Duke's team will also be looking to make hay out of Giuffre's own inconsistencies over the years in the telling, and retelling, of her story. They see Giuffre as an unreliable narrator, pointing to errors in certain dates and figures she provided.

Giuffre herself told *Panorama* that she might have a 'foggy memory' for dates or places, but not for faces.

'There's a clear difference here though,' McCawley says, her seemingly permanent smile slipping. 'In Virginia's history you're dealing with someone who has weathered significant abuse. She may have got a particular date wrong or some other information that they will try to point to, but when you're a minor – [later] reflecting back on what happened to you some years before, that's very different to an adult making inconsistencies in respect to where he was, what he was doing, pretending he doesn't remember the photograph of her and doesn't remember being in a place where multiple people can put him.'

Born Sigrid Cecilia Stone in June 1972, the youngest of three girls in a single-parent family, McCawley says she learnt to hustle from a young age. 'I'd say it



Above Prince Andrew and Emily Maitlis on Newsnight, 2019.

stems from growing up with such a strong female figure. My mom raised three children all on her own, working three jobs to put us through school. She'd be working part-time as a tennis instructor, as well as her job at the department store, doing anything really that would bring in money.'

McCawley was never pushed to succeed, she says, but was naturally very ambitious. 'I grew up quickly, took things very seriously. I was probably too serious a child,' she says. Everyone always thought she was the eldest sibling, 'just because of how I behaved – an old soul, you know?'

The family could probably best be described as aspirational working class, like many of the Americans who moved to Florida after the land boom of the 1920s.

McCawley went on to study law at one of the state's leading universities, which felt like an obvious choice for someone who wanted to

'Suddenly there was a culture where these women were listened to'

be a champion of the underrepresented. There, one of her professors recommended she apply for a clerkship with a justice in the Southern District of Florida – where she would learn how to litigate. Any spare time she had, she spent volunteering at a domestic-violence shelter, which she believes 'charted the course' for the work she would go on to do.

Not that she didn't have her sights set on the top. She was just 28 when, in 2001, she accepted a job at the newly established South Florida office of Boies Schiller Flexner – now one of the most storied litigation powerhouses in the US (it represented Al Gore in the Supreme Court case that decided the 2000 presidential election, against George Bush; and helped strike down a gay-marriage ban in California). The previous year she had married real-estate attorney Daniel McCawley, whom she met in 1997. 'I thought I'd be like my mom – have my babies and be on my own, but then I met him and that was it,' she laughs.

Despite the pull of work, the couple quickly started dreaming of the family they

would build together. They had both grown up with siblings and decided on five children – a proper brood, they thought.

It came as a shock when McCawley was told in her early 30s that she could find it difficult to conceive naturally. She went about finding 'one of the best fertility doctors in America', who told her with absolute certainty, 'We will get you pregnant.' And he did.

All four of her children are 'IVF miracles'. The first, Kincaid, is now 16, then there are 13-year-old twins Maxwell and Zachary, and Madeleine, who just turned seven. 'I always remember how long I've been working on the Epstein case because it started with Maddie,' she says. Approaching 50, McCawley is nevertheless open to adopting one last child to hit their target number.

She says her work-life balance is wildly off-kilter, and the pandemic has only made it worse. She regularly works evenings and weekends, and spends increasing amounts of time travelling between Florida and New York – for the Prince Andrew and Maxwell cases, but for her commercial ones, too.

She used to have a strict 7pm cut-off (bedtime for the youngest of her children), but the pandemic blurred clients' boundaries and she has ended up fielding calls at all hours of the day.

'Mommy was home a lot during the lockdown, which was nice for [the children], but I was pretty much going from my bed to my desk focused on a big, demanding project for most of it. My husband really stepped up. He works super-hard too, but he has more of a nine-to-five. He's coaching the football games and all that.'

'Mostly my life is just holding it together,' she says, modestly, when I inquire about any hobbies.

Like many women in her profession, being underestimated has been a running theme in McCawley's career. She says that even after 20 years at Boies Schiller Flexner, she still gets mistaken for a legal aide. 'I can't even count the amount of times I get asked if I'm a court reporter or an assistant,' she tells me. 'Even from the opposing counsel. Oftentimes I feel it's intentional.'

But McCawley, who was recently promoted to become one of only two female managing partners in the company's nearly 25-year history, is no rookie. Soon after she took on Giuffre as a client, she was involved in settling a \$100 million class-action lawsuit against energy giant Halliburton, which went to the Supreme Court twice. 'It's the public-interest stuff that really drives me,' she says.

The big bucks McCawley brings in from her commercial briefs – aka her 'day job' – allow her to work pro bono on other cases – specifically those of Epstein's victims. Those cases, in

turn, have kept Boies Schiller Flexner firmly in the public eye. A happy quid pro quo.

Her first breakthrough for Giuffre came in 2015, when she was able to file a lawsuit against British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell. Giuffre told McCawley she had been recruited as a teenager by Maxwell while working at Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago club. Many of Epstein's victims allege Maxwell acted as the right-hand woman to the financier, scouting girls for him. The 59-year-old has denied the allegations.

McCawley and the team saw an opportunity after Maxwell publicly accused Giuffre of telling 'obvious lies' about the alleged abuse, and sued Maxwell for defamation. Maxwell settled the case for an undisclosed sum in 2017, which encouraged other alleged victims of Epstein to come forward. In *United States v Ghislaine Maxwell*, McCawley is representing one of those women, Annie Farmer, whose abuse by Epstein at the age of 16 was not followed up by the FBI back in 1996.

Epstein, who had been convicted of soliciting prostitution from a minor more than 10 years earlier, was arrested again in 2019 on charges related to federal sex-trafficking.

'Suddenly there was a culture where these women were being listened to,' says McCawley. They were no longer being written off as 'prostitutes and liars'.

After Epstein's death the focus shifted to Maxwell, who was arrested in July 2020 in a backwater town in New Hampshire. She is currently in prison awaiting trial on sex-trafficking charges, to which she had pleaded not guilty.

In preparation for our interview, I have read hundreds of pages of deposition that

McCawley took from Maxwell as part of the defamation suit. It's in her cross-examination that you come to appreciate her ability to push buttons, the particular way she has of getting under a defendant's skin. You can almost feel Maxwell blushing through the pages when McCawley forces her to answer a question about sex toys at one of Epstein's residences. At one point, her line of attack causes a usually tightly controlled Maxwell to lose her temper and slam her fists on the table.

Part of Maxwell's defence is that she has been scapegoated by the US government for the crimes of Epstein, who took his own life in his cell at a high-security prison in New York, in August 2019. (Funds from his estate have since been used to pay out nearly \$125

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million to 135 accusers.) Maxwell's legal team points to the court's denial of bail for their client on a proposed \$28.5 million bond – dwarfing the amount put up by disgraced former IMF head Dominique Strauss-Kahn – as evidence of unequal treatment.

McCawley politely declines to answer my questions on Maxwell, in deference to a judge's order ahead of the trial, which is expected to begin on 29 November. She described the heiress's arrest at the time, however, as a 'wonderful' and 'tear-filled' moment.

McCawley regularly appears in the media and has become almost famous in her own right, joining the ranks of lawyers who've seen their profiles boosted after taking on

MeToo-related cases.

She was all over the television networks the day 66-year-old Epstein was found hanged at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in Manhattan – despite having learnt of his suicide while on safari with her husband and children in South Africa. She had brought a satellite phone with her, as she tends to do on vacation. Wouldn't do not to be reachable. She racked up an sizeable bill giving various interviews, as well as trying to comfort Giuffre and other survivors when the news broke.

However devastating Epstein's suicide may have been for her, she says it was heart-breaking for the women, who have waited so long for justice. 'They were all going through something different. Some were upset, some were angry. They really needed him to be punished.' She takes another delicate sip of her tea. 'Sometimes I'm more of a counsellor and a friend than a lawyer in these moments.'

She sees a lot riding on the two cases making their way through the New York courts. Prince Andrew stepping back from public duties is a major win, McCawley says, whatever might happen next. The Duke, meanwhile, is confident he'll clear his name.

For McCawley, ever fighting on the side of the underdog, the cases represent the last real chance to hold to account the people accused of aiding and abetting Epstein, the monster that continues to haunt his victims, even in death.

'We'll find them peace,' she says.

This woman is not one to make promises she can't keep. As to what that peace might entail, however? That's all still to play for.