

McGreevey v. McGreevey

Everything we didn't really want to know about the former governor and his wife has come out at their ugly divorce trial *By Michael Callahan*

"If you had it to do all over again," the girl said, "would you do something else?"

"Nobody has it to do all over again," Craig said.

—Irwin Shaw, Evening in Byzantium

Some 60,000 New Jersey couples filed for divorce in 2007, the detritus of their marriages floating through 21 county courthouses—promises of “Till death do

us part” that morphed into “Till lawyers do us part.” Tucked away in Room 105 of the Union County Courthouse in Elizabeth lies a bulging folder containing the tattered remains of such a union, one that began on a brilliant sunny day in the shadow of the White House and ended on another sunny day inside the New Jersey Statehouse, at a press conference where millions of people watched it crumble, live, behind a podium.

In the beginning, Docket Number FM-20-01166-07G, the Complaint for Divorce between James E. McGreevey, plaintiff, and Dina Matos McGreevey, defendant, showed all sorts of promise, if a divorce proceeding can actually *show* promise. In his initial filing of February 2, 2007, the disgraced ex-governor of New Jersey was downright cheery. In his motion, he stated that the two parties had mutually agreed to end their marriage and had basically worked out a tentative settlement addressing issues of alimony, custody, child support and parenting time for their five-year-old-daughter, Jacqueline. The document laid out a vision for a very grown-up approach to the split, conjuring the image of two devoted parents committed to dissolving their marriage with dignity and reserve.

A year and a half later, that vision lies in tatters, as anyone following the McGreevey divorce saga can tell you. Read the motions, counter-motions and assorted other legal hand grenades each side has lobbed at the other over that period, and you can almost trace, like a stock chart, the plummeting fortunes of the McGreevey civil discourse. Dina alleged that Jim exposed their daughter to homo-



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erotic art and used her to sell copies of his memoir; she also rolled out a wheelbarrow of past slights, like the accusation that she and Jacqueline were in a car accident and Jim didn't come to the hospital because he was in the middle of his morning workout. Jim returned fire with equal brio, accusing his estranged wife of emotionally manipulating Jacqueline, being a homophobe, and simply morphing into, more or less, "a bitter, vengeful woman."

As the months have ground on, the couple's brawl has devolved into the kind of ludicrous pettiness usually reserved for catfights among sixth-grade girls. The McGreeveys haggled over the drop-off point for Jacqueline's visitations with Jim, down to whether a Barnes & Noble located 9.63 miles from Dina's house (a MapQuest set of directions was actually entered into evidence) was a fair spot. (This bickering alone, which eventually amounted to whether Jacqueline would spend 22 minutes in the car vs. 31 minutes in the car, went on for *two months*.) Last November, Jim went right to court rather than work out a deal with Dina over Jacqueline's American Girl birthday party, a move that caused the aggrieved judge in the case, Karen Cassidy, to declare the whole affair "out of control" and scold both parents, opining that "the hatred you two have for each other overrides everything."

All of which has everybody—everybody, it seems, except Jim and Dina McGreevey—asking a simple question: How? How did the dissolution of the marriage between the affable former governor and his stylish wife dissolve, so quickly and so virulently, into charges of unbridled ambition and Machiavellian emotional manipulation (that's Dina pointing the finger at Jim), Paris Hilton consumerism and scorned-woman revenge (Jim, back at Dina), and, oh yeah, steamy Friday-night threesomes with their studly 20-year-old chauffeur? (More on that shortly.)

Among people who know them, there is an air of recoiling surprise that the McGreevey divorce turned so irrevocably, and unnecessarily, toxic. "I feel sorry for Dina, and I feel sorry for him," says a mutual friend who knew the couple during their days in the governor's mansion. "And I think the fact that neither of them has allowed grace or any sort of redemptive wave to roll over this drama is pathetic."

Finding redemption can be tricky business when two people face a sudden, vio-



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lent fork in the road and each goes down a different path, one happily skipping, the other staggering. That fork came during the press conference in Trenton at which Jim McGreevey announced he was leaving office and declared publicly, for the first time, "My truth is that I am a gay American." Anyone who has ever come out of the closet will tell you that there ensues a stunning burst of exhilaration, of weight-off-the-shoulders freedom. But for Dina, the moment was exactly the opposite: As her husband took the first steps to a new identity and happily took a sledgehammer to his old one, he also took one to hers, with seemingly no thought given to the fact that *she* had no new life to run to—just an old one now shattered. And so it was in that moment on national television that the perfect storm, set in motion by Jim and Dina McGreevey on the night of his election to the governor's office in 2001, erupted.

If you were to spend a few days at the McGreevey divorce trial—and be glad you haven't—what you'd see would be the worst elements of the reality-television culture that we've become. On the right side of the courtroom sits Jim, almost always in an ill-fitting navy suit, a red tie and bad rubber-soled shoes. He bounds into court each day with an aw-shucks enthusiasm that is almost jarring, as if the coach has just called him off the bench. He regularly chats up the jaded press corps, and if he notices their open disdain for both him and these proceedings, he never shows it. He then invariably grabs his leather-bound Bible—his prop of choice since announcing plans last year to become an Episcopal priest—adjusts his glasses, and drops into his role as novice divinity student at the plaintiff's table.

His wife is quite another story. Circumspect and aloof, she almost invariably arrives in court after McGreevey, and unless it's Oprah or Larry King, she doesn't utter a word to the press. With a helmet of anchorwoman hair the color of a school bus and a penchant for tailored suits of the Nancy Reagan era, she has spent most days at the trial with her head down, looking alternately bored and peeved.

Rounding out the drama are the supporting cast: John Post, Dina's patrician, white-haired, mannerly counsel; the theatrical Stephen Haller, the third attorney who has handled McGreevey's case (Jim



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parted ways with the first two) and a man who, in the words of one courthouse regular, “can be found in any room where there’s a camera”; and the aforementioned Judge Cassidy, whose general demeanor suggests a ninth-grade social studies teacher continually exasperated by her students’ failure to hand in their book reports on time. Post and Haller have known one another professionally for years. At times, the matchup has taken on the vague air of a vaudeville act. One morning before testimony began, Haller declared his love for Post, and they hugged. “If you hadn’t said you had a cold, I’d have kissed you,” Haller said as they broke apart. “That’s what I was afraid of,” Post replied drolly. (Ba-dum-bum.) Another day, Haller slipped his hand onto Post’s right thigh. Post almost leapt out of his skin. “Better look out, John,” McGreevey smirked from his seat. “It’s catching.”

Of course, not everyone finds the side-show so appealing. “It’s all just totally unbelievable,” says Arlene Lauer, whose job it is to organize civil cases filed in the courthouse every year. Arlene is one of several gossipy, pillowy women I’ve come to dub The Girls of Civil Procedure during my days wading through the morass that is *McGreevey v. McGreevey*. Since the case began, more than 18 months ago, the Girls have seen the courthouse turned upside down by the circus playing out inside the courtroom on the ninth floor. At one point the Girls had a pool going over how long the trial would last, but in the end there was no winner: None of them had imagined the freak show would still be running.

“I don’t know,” Arlene remarks to me one day, sitting in her cramped corner cube, reading glasses perched atop her copper-colored bob. “I mean, don’t you think this is all ridiculous?” She shakes her head as she reaches for her ringing phone. “Some people,” she’s saying as she picks up the receiver, “just haven’t got any sense.”

Perhaps not. But what both Jim McGreevey and Dina Matos did have, from the beginning of their unorthodox courtship—he asked her out by having an aide call her to schedule a date—was ambition. And that may help explain how this mess got so, well, messy.

Jim was—and in many ways still is—the kid who wants everyone to like him, and who uses that “Hey, buddy” aura to insinuate himself into the cool kids’ club, no matter what the moral cost. “An ambitious politician quickly learns, as I did, to

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countenance and even sponsor fundamentally corrupt behavior while insulating himself, for as long as he can, behind a buffer of deniability," he writes in *The Confession*, his 2006 autobiography that landed him on Oprah's couch and put a good number of readers to sleep. (An entire section details the history and demographics of Woodbridge, New Jersey.) People wanted shovels of dirt and got teaspoons. The book, like McGreevey himself, is affable, slightly maddening, and often disingenuous.

Perhaps it was this quixotic brew that attracted Dina Matos when she first met him in October 1995, at a meeting of a Portuguese civic group. He was 38; she was 28. She later recalled thinking "he was handsome, in a Tom Hanks kind of way." Dina was and still appears reserved, somewhat entitled and a tad icy, which hasn't served her well through the trial. But as a Portuguese immigrant who came to this country at the age of eight not speaking a whit of English, she always felt somewhat off-center, out of the mix—which may help explain why she so easily mistook the faux intimacy offered by the winsome Jim McGreevey for the real thing. Why, by her own admission, she "missed the signs."

Their courtship was banal and ordinary, mainly conducted at chicken dinners for New Jersey politicians. Jim was the mayor of Woodbridge and an up-and-coming face in the hurly-burly world of New Jersey politics; Dina was a community organizer and an adept fund-raiser for a hospital in Newark. But even without the guidance of hindsight, their romance seems oddly detached, lacking in the tender, tiny, just-the-two-of-us moments that forge genuine love affairs. One of the most telling anecdotes both relay in their respective memoirs is of a romantic getaway they took to Montreal, only to hit a stretch of black ice on a highway en route and spend the night in an off-the-beaten-path motel. (Interestingly, each claims to have taken the wheel as the car spun out of control.) Once inside the room, Jim—according to Dina—began climbing into the opposite single bed from hers, until she convinced him to come snuggle with her.

McGreevey had lost, barely, his initial run for governor against incumbent Christine Todd Whitman in 1997. He was certain he could come out on top in 2001, when he would eventually face conservative firebrand Bret Schundler. And having a Laura Bush Lite wife would surely help.

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He hoped, he writes in his book, "that living with Dina would help me enforce the boundaries I'd been trying to maintain for years. If I stayed single, with no structural safeguard, there was no telling what sort of volatile situation I might get into."

Their wedding, in October 2000, had all the trappings of an ambitious politician and his equally ambitious wife. Though neither was from the Washington, D.C., area, they got married at the Hay-Adams Hotel, and their wedding photo shows them standing in front of the backdrop of the White House. ("In my mind, it was kind of a campaign stop," Jim wrote later.) In the picture, Jim is in a tux, Dina in Vera Wang—"the dress of my dreams," she said. Dina later hung a poster-size portrait of herself in the dress in her bedroom.

With his new blond wife in tow, McGreevey set out to win the governor's mansion, and this time he did. And one can track back to the exact moment the course of Jim and Dina McGreevey was set—the one that has led them to one of the most hideous divorces ever recorded. It was November 7, 2001, when Jim stood at the podium of the Hilton hotel in East Brunswick and declared victory.

Because it was on this night that Jim McGreevey would discover, all too quickly, that his ambition, stoked for years as he poked about in the muck of New Jersey politics, carried a price. He had spent a lot of political capital getting elected governor, and a lot of people were expecting payback. He had also begun an affair with an aide named Golan Cipel, whom he'd met in Israel, and for the first time the revulsion he felt about his latent homosexuality, carried around like a sack of coal inside his heart for years, gave way to a naive teenager's fantasy of forbidden romance.

The idea of being first lady held enormous appeal for Dina: In her memoir, she refers to herself as the "first lady-elect." (The term "first lady" appears 10 times on page 132 alone.) Seeing herself as a modern-day Jackie Kennedy (a comparison also made in her book), she eventually redecorated Drumthwacket, the governor's mansion, and tried to be the kind of elegant hostess required of the wife of a head of state—even if the state was New Jersey. On the night of Jim's inaugural, a state trooper was "assigned the role of Protector of the Gown," Dina writes. He followed her around with his arms outstretched, to make sure no one stepped on her train.



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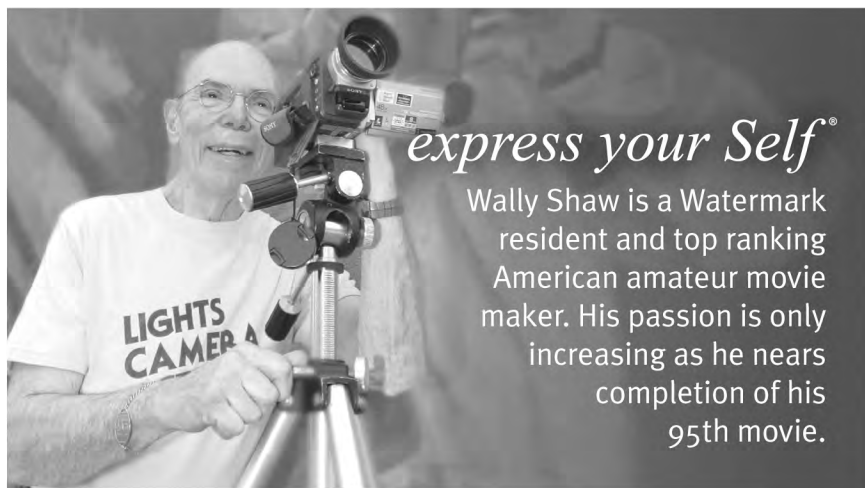
And so the makings of that perfect storm had gathered: a politician who checked his ethics at the door, whose administration would quickly be riddled by scandal, and who had begun living a high-risk, full-fledged double life that could destroy him at any moment; his wife, who so desperately yearned for the trappings that come from being the governor's spouse that she had an official portrait taken and business cards that read DINA MATOS McGREEVEY, FIRST LADY printed, complete with the official state seal, while by her own admission she ignored the clouds brewing over her marriage; and their daughter, without whom the whole sordid, sad saga of Jim and Dina McGreevey might have quietly died, as it so obviously should have, in a file cabinet drawer in Room 105 of the Union County Courthouse.

"I think he knew in his heart of hearts at the time—he needed to get a wife, and he went and got one. And I think he really used her," says a former friend of the couple. "But I don't think she was an unwitting partner. She probably knew something was up with this guy."

Scandal is the fuel that feeds our 24-hour news cycle today, and Jim McGreevey's confession that he had a secret gay lover, had hired this lover for a homeland security post he wasn't qualified for, and had been blackmailed by this lover, forcing him to resign his office in August 2004, was the media equivalent of a tractor-trailer of gasoline. Everyone seemed aghast except the governor himself, who proudly declared his gayness as Dina stood by his side in a powder-blue St. John suit, her terrible frozen smile coming off as a sad impersonation of the Joker squaring off against Batman.

Splashes of gasoline have continued to stoke the story, perhaps the biggest being Teddy Pedersen, part of the cabal of good-looking young men who were members of the McGreevey political posse and whom Dina later labeled "The Lost Boys." (Signaling the coming political apocalypse, a month before McGreevey resigned, the *Record* of Bergen County ran an exposé on the Lost Boys: "NJ Governor James E. McGreevey Hires a Dozen 'Pretty Boys'; Big Jobs, No Experience Needed.")

If Teddy is to be believed, he regularly hopped into bed with Jim and Dina for threesomes, assignations they eventually dubbed "Friday-night specials," accord-



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ing to him. In an interview with the *Star-Ledger* in March, Pedersen, now 29 and a real estate developer, claimed the trio would go out to eat at a local TGI Friday's, then retreat to McGreevey's condo for sex. These exploits don't appear in either Jim's or Dina's memoirs, though Pedersen has given a sealed deposition in the divorce case. Dina denies the threesomes ever happened, a view shared by people who know her. "Frankly, I think she's a prude," says one of them. "Look, you can't always tell what someone is like in bed. But it's like some people are good huggers, and others are barely out of the freezer. Dina is a chin-to-chin toucher by way of greeting. Never mind hot—she's not warm. She would be a very odd person to have a threesome."

Which raises one final question: Who cares? In the almost four years since the resignation, as the McGreeveys have squared off—in court, in the media, and, ironically, given their fight over where to drop off Jacqueline, on the shelves of Barnes & Noble—to each get their version of their ridiculous marriage accepted as the official one, the second rule of scandal has surfaced: Even in America, there's a point where we've had enough. (Heard from Britney lately? My point exactly.) Jim's book quickly fell off the best-seller list; Dina's never made it there at all.

Dina's seemingly dazed appearance on *Larry King Live* following the Eliot Spitzer sexcapade in March (Silda Spitzer having had her own awful turn at the podium with her husband) seemed to somehow put an exclamation point on all the McGreevey fatigue. Speaking in her flat mouthful-of-mashed-potatoes voice, Dina reiterated the Dina canon: Jim married me for political gain, Jim never loved me, Jim's resignation was "as if he were making another political speech during a campaign season."

Jim found himself a hunky, wealthy boyfriend (Australian financier Mark O'Donnell), moved into a baronial mansion in Plainfield, and announced his plans to serve in the Episcopal Church. (While McGreevey is taking classes at the General Theological Seminary in New York, a school spokesman says he isn't currently enrolled in a divinity degree program.) All of which has only served to feed Dina's stewing, brewing anger further, as she sits in her modest *Brady Bunch*-style house and wonders about What Might Have Been If My Husband Hadn't Come Out of the Closet. "Jim seemed to have no sense

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that this was a catastrophe looming in my life and Jacqueline's as well as his own," she writes in her book, wryly titled *Silent Partner*. "There was no compassion, only self-absorption. I had given so much and worked so hard for Jim, and for goals I believed in as much as he did. Nevertheless, soon I would have no home, no husband, no marriage. And throughout all of this, Jim had never once told me he was sorry."

Today, both of them are unemployed. Both are broke and deep in six-figure legal debt. And both are still dug in, bracing for a possible third phase of their seemingly never-ending divorce trial, this one dealing with Dina's fraud charge, alleging that Jim tricked her into marrying him. If it proceeds to trial—and Dina wants a jury if it does—Teddy Pedersen will, in all likelihood, be called to testify, setting up yet another wince-inducing stretch for The Girls of Civil Procedure and all the rest of us burned out by and fed up with Jim and Dina McGreevey.

"There's a rule: Never pick a fight with someone who's got nothing to lose," McGreevey's attorney, Stephen Haller, says. "Jim's got nothing to lose. He can't be knocked down further, he can't be made fun of more, he can't be denigrated to a lower degree. He has really suffered whatever there is to suffer as a result of this whole business."

Some of Dina's friends feel she's gotten short shrift in media coverage, in large measure because Jim is so much more seasoned in dealing with the press. They also feel that some of Jim's timing during the case—such as announcing his intention to study for the priesthood the day after Dina's memoir was published—has been ruthlessly tactical. "The thing about Jim that nobody gets is that Jim acts like if you say it, it's true," says one Dina pal who didn't want to be identified speaking about her. "So at the same time he's pursuing this incredible vendetta against her, and is passive-aggressive, he will come out and say, 'We're all trying to work this out. We all want what's best,' when he's behaving like a prick. The public sees what he's saying, but not what he's doing."

I ask Haller when he thinks all of this will be over, when Jim and Dina will finally let go of their hatred, move on. He doesn't hesitate. "I think it will be 12 more years," he says. "Then, Jacqueline will be 18." 🐘

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