

*From the Steven Avery case to the John Doe,*

# Making a Defender

Dean Strang confesses that he is guilty as charged: He likes defending underdogs. But he doesn't consider himself a crusader.

The Madison defense lawyer, who found sudden, international fame among TV binge-watchers via the Netflix documentary "Making a Murderer," was also at the center of the defense for conservative activists targeted by the John Doe investigation in Wisconsin. That may seem paradoxical, but Dean Strang has a track record of fighting for citizens standing up against government abuse:



# **lawyer Dean Strang challenges government power**



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ON THE  
FRONTLINES  
OF REFORM  
*by Betsy Thatcher*

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• With fellow criminal defense attorney Jerome Buting, Strang defended Steven Avery, the Manitowoc County man convicted of killing photographer Teresa Halbach, 25, in 2005. The defense team believed that authorities planted and manipulated evidence to frame Avery and were blind to other suspects. The case was the subject of the popular 10-part Netflix series.

• Strang's 2013 book, *Worse Than the Devil: Anarchists, Clarence Darrow and Justice in a Time of Terror*, is a meticulous look at the trial of a group of Italian immigrants in early 20th-century Milwaukee. The book examines the impact of hatred and fear of radical immigrants on the trial.

• A self-described "progressive or enlightened" liberal, Strang defended a supporter of Republican Gov. Scott Walker in 2013 when authorities, acting under the guise of Wisconsin's John Doe law, raided the homes of Walker allies and associates in search of evidence of alleged campaign violations.

"I do like the underdog," he said in a recent interview at his law firm, Strang Bradley, near Capitol Square overlooking Lake Monona. "Anybody who's got the government arrayed against them is the



Tom Lynn photo

underdog. ... If the government is charging you with a crime, of course the more impoverished you are, the less educated you are, the more you're an outsider as a matter of class or subculture, the more at risk you are."

Yet Strang, 55, maintains that he did not take on the two high-profile cases and write the book — all with

themes that suggest authorities sometimes abuse the tools given to them or chase an outcome based on biases — as part of a crusade against those in power.

## 'Where you want to be'

In the case of Avery, portrayed in the Netflix series as an uneducated outcast, Strang and Buting tried to show that Manitowoc County law enforcement targeted Avery. One theory is that the

## — CAREER HIGHLIGHTS —

- Co-founded Strang Bradley (2013)
- Hurley, Burish & Stanton, shareholder (2005-'13)
- Wisconsin's first federal defender (2000-'05)
- Fitzgerald & Strang, shareholder (1997-2000)
- Shellow, Shellow & Glynn, partner and associate (1988-'97)
- Co-founded the Wisconsin Coalition Against the Death Penalty (1994)
- Assistant U.S. attorney (1987-'88)
- Reinhart, Boerner, Van Deuren, Norris & Rieselbach, associate (1985-'87)
- Author of *Worse than the Devil: Anarchists, Clarence Darrow and Justice in a Time of Terror* (2013). His second book will be published in early 2018.
- Adjunct professor at Marquette University Law School, the University of Wisconsin Law School and UW's Division of Continuing Studies
- Member of the American Law Institute. Serves on several charity boards, including the Wisconsin Innocence Project

sheriff's department went after him because he had sued the county for \$36 million for his wrongful conviction in a 1985 rape. He was imprisoned for 18 years in that case.

"If you're a criminal defense lawyer, that's where you want to be," Strang says. "It was high-profile.

He was the most despised guy in Wisconsin. He had a compelling back story, and there was enough money (from Avery's \$400,000 settlement with Manitowoc County in the civil suit) that it wasn't going to be a financial disaster — a loss maybe, but not a disaster."

As for his John Doe client, identified in media reports as Deb Jordahl, a conservative strategist and consultant, "She came in, and we hit it off. I liked her. I felt for her, and she's smart and tough and funny and doesn't take herself too seriously. And she's opinionated. I kind of like opinionated people."

At the time, Strang knew nothing about campaign finance law or election law.

"Everybody else in the case was mostly a civil lawyer, and most practiced in that area, so I was kind of an odd fit," he says. "And I'm not conservative, I'm not Republican or conservative-leaning. I think (his client) needed to think about it. I needed to think about it."

It was at their second meeting that Strang realized, "This is where I want to be."

He viewed his client as "someone who may not have done anything illegal and is having her life turned upside down and, by association with Gov. Walker, is sort of taking an acid bath in the media."

The John Doe case, he says, is among a handful of cases that will stay with him for a long time because "it challenged me to work with people who've got a different set of opinions on a lot of issues than I do."

The post-"Making a Murderer" bloggers — who



have commented on everything from Strang's fashion sense to his sex appeal (one magazine article was headlined "Deconstructing Your Sexual Attraction to 'Making a Murderer's' Dean Strang in 13 Steps") — are completely missing the humble, principled individual,

his associates say.

"Dean has a great deal of integrity. What he has done in his career has nothing to do with being on a crusade or anything resembling that," says Stephen Hurley, a well-known Madison criminal defense lawyer who in 2005 wooed Strang to his firm, Hurley, Burish & Stanton. "It has everything to do with, at the moment, doing what he perceives to be the right thing."

## 'Absolutely brilliant'

Longtime Milwaukee defense lawyer James Shellow was one of Strang's earliest mentors and saw great potential in him.

In the mid-1980s, Strang was a young attorney at a big civil law firm when Shellow, a prominent and colorful trial lawyer, was brought in to help on a complicated case. Shellow came across an "absolutely brilliant pleading."

"It's unlikely that one reads that quality of writing or that thoroughness of research or that incredible insight that I thought was present in that pleading. The author of it was Dean Strang," says Shellow, known for sometimes working round the clock.

"I looked him up in the phone book, and I called him about 5 in the morning, and I said, 'It's 5 o'clock Sunday morning. What in the hell are you doing at home sleeping? Get your ass down here.'"

And so began what has become a long, professional history and friendship between the two men.

Eventually unsatisfied in civil law, Strang found himself

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drawn to the courtroom, where civil attorneys rarely appear. (They are paid to settle cases, not try them.) This revelation surprised him — he never intended to be a lawyer, let alone one arguing in court.

## A winding path to law

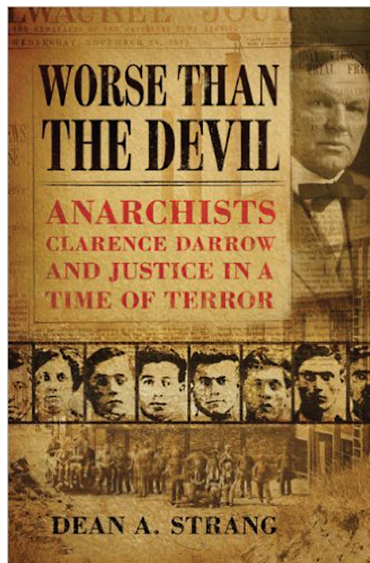
By age 13, Strang, who was born on Milwaukee's south side and raised in Greendale, was determined to be a political cartoonist. "I had a cartoon strip by the time I was 8," he says. It was about a dog named Pete.

As a boy, he discovered the work of Bill Mauldin, the Pulitzer Prize-winning infantryman who dispatched cartoons from the front lines during World War II for *Stars and Stripes*, the military's newspaper.

Strang's love of Mauldin's cartoons led to his decision to apply to Dartmouth College. "When I was 12 years old, and just cartooning all the time, I saw a squib in *The Milwaukee Journal* that said Bill Mauldin was teaching at Dartmouth. In my 12-year-old mind, I was like, 'Oh my God, there's a college that has Bill Mauldin as a professor, and if I go to this college, I can take classes from Bill Mauldin.' ... By the time I was 17 and applying to college, I probably could have or should have figured out that Mauldin was probably there for two weeks or something, or it was probably an artist-in-residence thing."

When Strang arrived at Dartmouth after graduating from Greendale High School, Mauldin wasn't there. But Strang kept pursuing cartooning and was published in college newspapers and the *Milwaukee Sentinel* at age 18.

By the time he was a college junior, though, he decided he needed a career that was more collaborative.



In addition, something bothered him about the emotional milieu of an editorial cartoonist.

"The cartoonist always points out the problem," Strang says. "He never suggests the solution. He's always the critic. I thought, 'I'll be a happier, better person if I'm not relentlessly critical, if I look for ways to solve problems rather than just identify them.'"

So what would he do with his life?

Strang's late father, a manufacturing engineer, always thought his only son would make a good lawyer. Lawyers were celebrated in his family. Strang's paternal aunt became a lawyer in 1952, when few women did, and was a "family icon." His late mother, a teacher, had an uncle who at one time was the longest-practicing attorney in Ohio.

"I sort of defaulted into law school," Strang says. "I entered law school in the fall of 1982. ... It was the beginning of the great bulge (in law school admissions in the United States), and you basically could be a zucchini and you could get into law school."

His law studies at the University of Virginia quickly revealed one thing to him: "I didn't ever want to set foot in a courtroom, and I thought I never would. I didn't take criminal procedure. I didn't take trial advocacy. I took evidence because we had to," Strang says.

## Criminal defense skills

After earning his law degree in 1985, Strang joined a Milwaukee civil law firm and found that he enjoyed litigation. He did a short stint in the U.S. attorney's office in Milwaukee, then joined Shellow, Shellow & Glynn and got into criminal defense. It was there that he began honing his skills.

"With every case, he got better, and with every case,

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he got more insightful, and with every case, he became more excited by what could be done in a criminal trial,” Shellow says of Strang’s time in his office in the 1980s and ’90s, first as an associate and later as a partner.

A few years after Strang left the firm for another, he was selected to be Wisconsin’s first federal defender. In establishing the office — dedicated to serving clients in federal criminal cases who cannot afford a lawyer — in the eastern and western

districts of Wisconsin, Strang “did what many thought was the impossible,” Hurley says.

“And he did it at great personal expense because he could have been making more money in private practice. And he did it very quietly and, as always, very competently and for all the right reasons,” he says.

Strang would never describe himself in such glowing terms.

“The courtroom isn’t always a comfortable place for me. I don’t have a killer instinct. I’m not terribly aggressive,” Strang says. He also shies away from the limelight, feeling awkward and out of place.

His college days were filled mostly with study and not a lot of socializing.

“I’d get invited to parties to break them up,” he says, laughing. “Every party needs somebody who will eventually drive people home, send them fleeing out the door. I can kill a party really quickly.”

To this day, Strang prefers quiet pursuits. He loves baseball, and on weekends at the office he often brings along Rufus, his and wife Jannea’s 5-year-old “half standard poodle, half Wheaten terrier and all wonderful” dog.

Strang’s quiet exterior belies an interior drive and passion, Hurley cautions.

“This is a guy who, when he sees something wrong that needs to be fixed or needs to be addressed, he goes out and does it,” Hurley says. “But he’s not a crusader. It’s about his going home at the end of the day feeling, ‘I have done the right thing.’ ” WT

*Betsy Thatcher is a freelance writer in West Bend and a former Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reporter.*

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