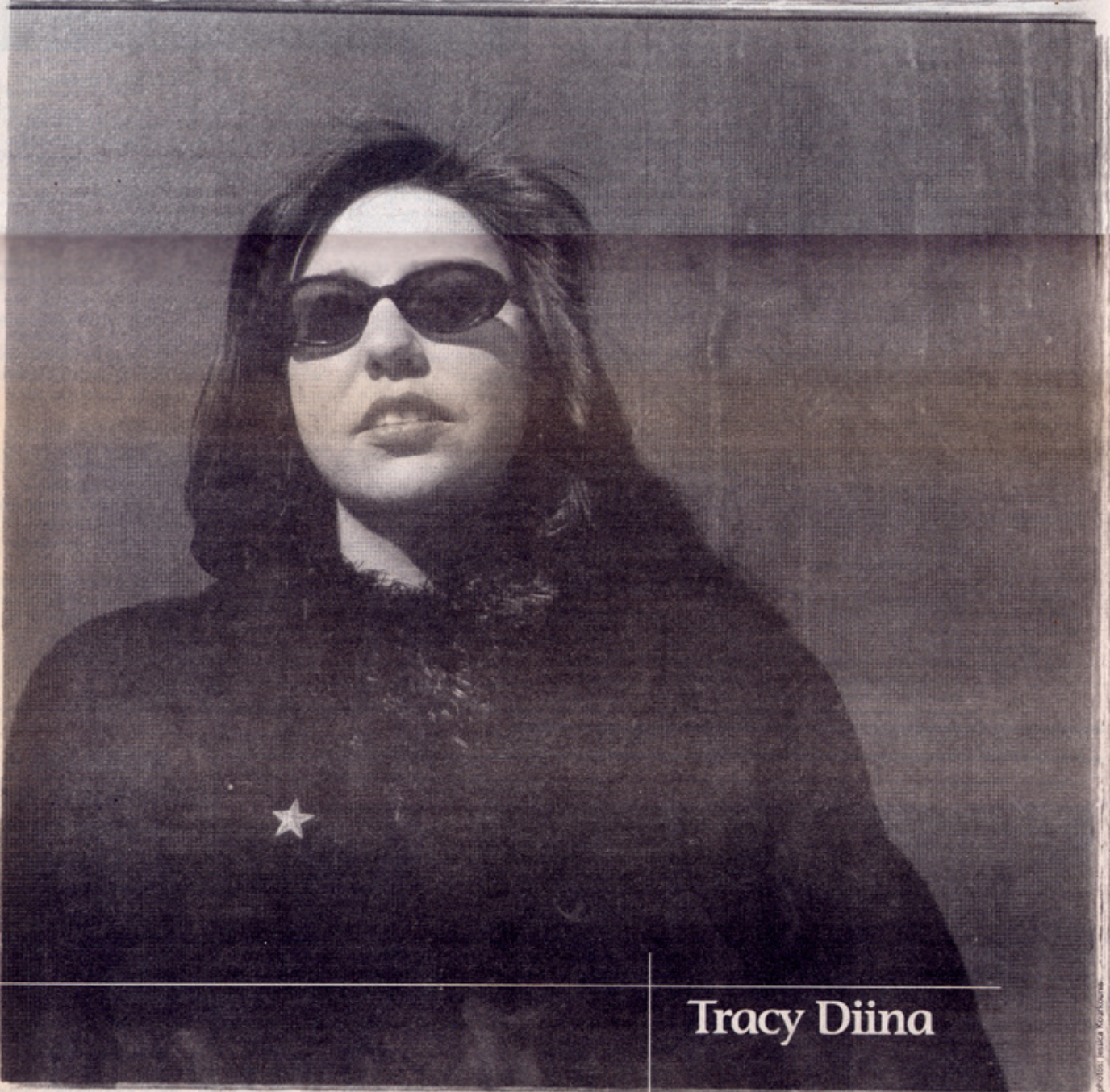
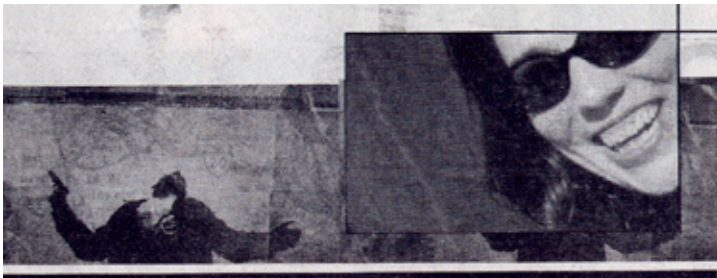


# Through the looking-glass

One woman's return from the cocaine roller coaster



Tracy Diina



by Glenn Gramigna

Tracy Diina's uncle is Buffalo Police Commissioner Rocco Diina. Tracy Diina is also a convicted drug offender and a recovering cocaine addict.

### From Bright Beginnings...

Diina sits in her City Hall office in downtown Buffalo looking for all the world like a woman who's always had it made. The Public Relations Director for the Buffalo Economic Renaissance Corporation and Coordinator of the Buffalo Byte Belt Initiative, the 31-year-old Diina is described by her colleagues as "bright," "attractive," "energetic," "unstoppable," and "a city hall version of the Energizer bunny."

But other descriptions could also be used when referring to the talented 31-year-old, whose presence at City Hall gives hope for Buffalo's future to the area's politicians and businesspersons, words that her friends and co-workers can't even imagine saying, words like addict, prisoner, and dealer.

Only the intensive help, staunch support, and unconditional love of her family and friends enabled Diina to escape the ravages of the junkie's life. They were there for her, even when she wasn't there for them. Blessed with a swift intelligence and a keen sense of creativity, Diina is one of a number of eager young Buffalonians who've decided to remain in their hometown, striving hard to give the city the economic kick-start and promotional boosting it dearly needs. For Diina, it wasn't always so.

In December 1993, during an early morning raid, she was arrested at the Kingy Livingston Lanes Motel in Genesee County and charged with numerous counts of possession and distribution of cocaine.

At the time, this North Buffalo golden girl, the kid who had everything going for her, the woman who would become the founding president of the 21st Century Club, was a desperate woman willing to do almost anything for a fix.

### Power and Privilege...

Diina might have spent the past seven years of her life in a prison cell. Instead she survived the ordeal and today finds herself amongst City Hall's political elite. If she had been poor, if she had been alone, if she had been friendless, the result would certainly have been different. It becomes clear when speaking to her that she still confronted with conflicting emotions regarding her social status and family connections and the effect they may have had on her sentencing. Her father Tony, of RJD Security, hired top-flight attorney Anthony Leonardo. He negotiated a deal in which Tracy was sentenced to seven years probation and 250 hours of community service. She spent only five days in jail, days she describes as "the scariest time of my life."

The experience left Diina grateful to her parents who put up \$100,000 bail and worked hard to bring her back on the right track. But the experience also left her angry about a drug war and a legal system, which often judges the crimes of the poor, and the powerful with totally different rules.

"I'm very glad my father got me out of where I was," says Ms. Diina, "and I'm very happy that I was able to get into a 12-step program and meet so many wonderful people in the recovery community. But I'm also very mad that there are so many people who are still in jail because they don't have the money to keep themselves out."

Surprisingly, at the heart of Tracy's conflict over her experience with the justice system is her belief that her sentence amounted to little more than a slap on the wrist. "I feel awful about it," she says, "because I know that forty percent of the people in jail are there for drug-related offenses. And I might have been one of them if not for the help of my family. I do think it's unfair, and I bleed for those people rotting in jail because they couldn't afford a good lawyer."

"But I'm not talking about all this to say, 'Look how great I am,' or even 'Look how far I've come,'" Diina adds. "I'm saying this because I want to remind the world of all the people like me who are still stuck in jail. Some of them could have become success stories too, but they just never got the chance."

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### Stranger Than Fiction...

In an ironic twist, Tracy Diina's life parallels some key plot points in the new movie *Traffic*, currently playing in theaters across the country and certain to make a big splash at the upcoming Academy Awards. In the film, the U. S. government's Drug Czar, played by Michael Douglas, discovers that his teenage daughter is a heroin addict. In the movie, the daughter's free-fall into junkie bliss includes sexual favors for a dealer in return for the drugs vital to her raging habit. *Traffic* makes the nihilistic case that the drug war is a waste of time, that drugs are everywhere, and that drug use cuts across all political and social lines, involving users of all ages, from young children who relish the joys of taking Ecstasy, to elderly marijuana smokers. Heroin and cocaine are as readily available to a fictional Drug Czar's daughter as they are to a real-life Police Commissioner's niece. Drug use is no longer relegated to ghetto back alleys. The suburbs are swirling in a swamp of abuse.

"Of course, I saw *Traffic*," says Diina, "I was waiting for it to come out. I think it's great that it brought up these issues for the American people to consider. Obviously, the drug war is futile. My favorite line in the movie is when someone says, 'Drugs are an unstoppable market force.' It's capitalism in its purest form. It's pure supply and demand. The drug trade can't be stopped by passing laws against it."

### You've Come A Long Way, Baby...

Ms. Diina has emerged in recent years as one of the city's most techno-savvy, well-connected young leaders, plugged into the dot.com world like few others. "The Mayor and Alan

DeLisle (BERC Executive Director) were farsighted enough to see the potential of high-tech, and they gave me a lot of freedom to work on it. So I sort of grabbed hold of it, and I've had a great time doing it. Working under their leadership, we've been able to attract over 30 high-tech companies to downtown Buffalo that have created over 3,000 jobs."

During the day, Tracy's world of high-tech wonders is vibrantly alive with young men and women working hard to use their knowledge in the interest of creating new industries and new opportunities for success. "At night," she says excitedly from her favorite table at Spot Coffee, "there's a really great scene, full of cool people who are interesting and definitely a lot of fun. Some call it slick, some call it hip. However you describe it, it's great!"

### The Downward Spiral...

Yet no matter how far removed Diina is from the day she got busted and her world fell in around her, the painful memories will always stay with her. She recalls the raid that took place at the crack of dawn as she lay sleeping in bed, the smell of free-based cocaine lingering in the air and an abusive, coke-dealing boyfriend by her side. "All of a sudden, there was this terrible banging on the door. They were yelling, 'Open up! Police!' When my boyfriend opened the door, there were all these police officers from both the county and the town. They were screaming at us, 'Get down! Get down!' When I tried to lift my hands up from under the covers they wouldn't let me. They were afraid I had a gun."

Twenty-four years old at the time, Diina was taken to the Rochester Holding Center, where she was thrown



into a large, dirty cell crowded with prostitutes, as numerous counts of cocaine possession and distribution were filed.

#### A Father Remembers...

Before the arrest that changed her life, Tracy was still in contact with her family. Needless to say, things were difficult. "I was shocked the last time I went to visit Tracy in Geneseo, when I saw how she was living," says her father. "It was clear that she had gone over the edge, due to her addiction. It was also clear that it would be hard to bring her back. She was living like a pig, with a very bad companion. All she seemed interested in was getting more drugs." Having to deal with the warped world of a daughter's drug addiction, Tony Diina and his wife Kathy were actually relieved when they got the telephone call that she had been arrested. Tracy's parents had long prepared themselves for something even worse. "After years of watching Tracy slip further and further down the spiral of her addiction," he admits, "we thought that possibly the next call we got would tell us she was dead."

#### Can't Get There From Here?

How could such a bright, dynamic young woman – a National Honor Society member at Holy Angels, a Youth Leadership Award-winner, A Prom Queen – fall so far so fast? "I always had a very strong rebellious streak," says Ms. Diina. "I smoked pot in high school and was almost thrown out for mouthing off too much. But I was a good student, too, an active volunteer at nursing homes, and so on. So I thought I could do cocaine and still keep it together. Boy, was I wrong."

She traces the origins of her downfall to a self-esteem problem, one that caused her to binge on diet pills when she was only eleven. She remained an attentive, if occasionally incorrigible, student, first at St. Rose of Lima Elementary School, and then Holy Angels Academy. She was a mainstay on the honor role and won numerous awards for her volunteer work. "Like a lot of kids, I always thought of myself as a little fat and maybe not quite good enough," Ms. Diina admits. "I tried

starving myself, but that just wasn't my thing. I always liked eating too much to fast."

After high school graduation, Diina was thrilled to be leaving the nest, choosing to attend Geneseo State College, where she majored in education and English.

Her problems with self-esteem and her tendency to drift toward bad companions and even worse habits traveled right along with her. "I was working hard enough on my school work at the start, but I was also spending a lot of time in the local bars," she reports. "I was a young, attractive girl. The bar life seemed like a great way to get away from my self-esteem problems, or whatever they were. I was getting a lot of attention from guys. Unfortunately, they weren't always the right kind of guys."

The drinking turned into pot smoking, and finally, cocaine use. In spite of this, Diina told herself, she was holding things together. After all, her grades were fine. Her downward spiral accelerated after she met a charismatic 40-year old coke dealer. The man, who she won't name, swept the then twenty-two year old Tracy off her feet. "At the beginning, it seemed fine" she says, "but, eventually we ran out of money, because we were eating up all the profits. We moved to this large house, filled with prostitutes and drug addicts. My boyfriend became paranoid, to the point where he wouldn't let me leave his sight, or even read. He began abusing me. Things were getting worse and worse. But all I could think about was scoring more drugs."

#### The Ties That Bind...

The hold that addiction has over people is readily apparent when Tracy admits that if given half the chance, even after her family rescued her from a jail cell, she still would have gone back to Geneseo to feed her habit. At one point on the long ride home, her father abruptly stopped the car, telling her she could either "get out" or "get help."

"Eventually, I got into rehab," Diina recalls. "At first, I didn't want to be there and actually had a few relapses which

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– Tracy Diina

could have sent me back to jail for seven years. That's why, when I read about what has happened to Robert Downey Jr., I want to cry, because I realize that could have been me. Addicts tend to have relapses in the early stages of recovery. It doesn't mean you should throw them in the trash heap. But I know that's what a lot of people think."

Over time, Tracy began to notice how content members of her rehab group seemed to be. She began to feel like she wanted to be one of them. Joining a 12-step program, she started going to weekly meetings, something she still does today. "I know I have an addictive personality," she says, "so I'm very careful to continue to go to my meetings and keep in touch with my sponsor. Those things serve as my bulwark against relapses. Now when I feel angry or lonely, instead of taking a drink or turning to drugs, I rely on my coping strategies such as calling my sponsor or a friend or working on my 12 steps or saying a prayer," Diina adds. "It's those things that have really kept me going through it all." It's a tough road, but she's not alone.

"I've known people who were clean and sober for twenty years and had relapses," notes Assemblyman Sam Hoyt, the new Chairman of the New York State Assembly's Alcohol and Drug Abuse Committee and a recovering alcoholic himself. "A person with a history of addiction is never completely out of danger. The smart thing about Tracy is that she stuck close to her support systems, her 12-step program, her sponsor. She still goes to all the meetings. That's why she's done so well."

"Sam is right," she replies. "As a former addict, you are never completely out of the woods. Sure, it's something I will live with the rest of my life. But the

difference is that I'm getting the chance to fight this battle as a free person, with a good job and friends, and my family around me. There are a lot of other people who aren't so lucky. So many are all alone in jail, stuck with 30-year jail sentences. And what are we doing about it? That's the real tragedy."

After returning to college to earn her masters, Diina was able to make a go of a series of jobs as an aide, first to State Senator Anthony Nanula, and then to County Legislator Judy Fisher. She soon secured the position she holds today. Diina also found time to help launch the 21st Century Club, a group of young, mainly political up and comers, which sponsors forums on important issues.

Her future brighter than she could ever have imaged, Diina says, "One day I woke up and realized that I had turned a corner. I was in rehab. I was off drugs. I had finished my master's degree. I was on my way to being free."

*Editing and additional reporting by Michael Calleri and Jeffrey Miers.*



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