

# Secrets OF THE



Adler ran the Y for 25 years.



Adler's mistress, Cathy Marto, and her son-in-law Sal Taddeo.



Taddeo is accused of extorting contractors who worked for the Y.

Sol Adler devoted his life to the 92nd Street Y, courting its billionaires and burnishing its cultural power. But when he brought scandal to its doorstep, the institution kicked him to the curb. And that, his family says, is what killed him.

BY STEVE FISHMAN

**When Debbie Adler reviews** the events of May 9, which she does obsessively, she figures that her husband had about 20 minutes to kill himself.

For 25 years, Sol Adler had been the executive director of the **92nd Street Y**, which he'd helped build into one of the country's premier cultural institutions and one of the wealthiest. But he had been fired the previous summer for what was described as "an undisclosed long-term personal relationship" with an assistant. A week earlier, the Y had appointed a new executive director.

That morning Adler had canceled his therapist appointment. "I'm having a bad morning," he told Debbie. "I'm feeling a little paranoid. I'm just going to take a Xanax and go back to bed."

Debbie was devastated after learning of the affair, but she had tried to set aside her anger. Her husband was not well. A month after he lost his job, he had slashed his wrists, and eight months later his throat. He insisted to Debbie he hadn't intended to die. He wanted to inflict pain on himself "like the pain he felt he was inflicting on his family."

Debbie believed him. And besides, she couldn't watch him every second. That morning, she told him, "I'm just going to have breakfast with Mommy." Her mother lived a few blocks away. Sol told her to call him 20 minutes before she was coming home. "I'll take a shower and then we'll go get some plants," he said. Mother's Day was approaching, and every year they planted something outside the house. He climbed back into bed in boxers and a T-shirt. Debbie left around 10:30.

At about noon, Sol called to request a turkey sandwich, which Debbie took as a positive sign since he'd been shedding weight. Debbie bought the sandwich and called to tell him she was on her way. He didn't answer. She told herself to stay calm. Maybe the Xanax had put him to sleep.

As soon as she stepped through the door, she saw him. He was hanging from the second-floor banister, dressed in sweatpants as if ready for plant shopping. He'd used an extension cord. Debbie put her arm around him, buttressed him with her hip, trying to relieve the pressure on his neck. She had to let him go to run to the kitchen for a knife. She cut him down as swiftly as she could and administered CPR, a skill that, as a neonatal nurse, she knew well.

"He was gone. He was gone," she told me. She didn't blame him. In her mind, there was little doubt what pushed him over the edge. "The Y brutalized him. They beat him when he was down," she said.

Even six months after his death, Debbie didn't know all the details of his secret life, which involved much more than an affair. Her husband was also connected to a convicted felon and a corruption scandal inside the institution he loved. Not that the details mattered to her. Whatever mistakes he had made, they shouldn't have cost him everything.



Deborah Adler, the widow of Sol Adler. Photo: Danielle Levitt

**The Adlers lived in Sea Gate**, a middle-class haven on the western tip of Coney Island. Just outside the gates are hundreds of subsidized apartments. Inside, there are winding streets with 100-year-old single-family houses, along

with a private gymnastics club and a private police department. Debbie is the third generation of her family to live there. She and Sol raised their boys across the street from the ocean. For Sol, the drive to the Y on the Upper East Side could take two hours depending on traffic. But it was worth the sacrifice. “We were in a place where we were all happy,” Matt, his youngest son, told me.

One evening last month, Debbie assembled her three sons and their lawyer, Douglas Wigdor — she has filed a nearly \$3 million suit against the Y for breach of contract and disability discrimination — to talk about Sol. We sat around a coffee table in the living room, which, like the rest of the house, is comfortable but hardly fancy. To his family, Sol was not a complicated man. “He wanted to help people,” said Debbie. “He would do anything for you the minute he met you.” Debbie recalled an evening at a Lebanese restaurant in Bay Ridge. “The couple sitting next to us was talking about their son looking for a job.” Sol leaned over. “Excuse me, what is your son interested in doing?” he asked.

That’s why he loved working at the Y so much. He started in 1977 as the Y’s controller and in 1988, at 34, was appointed executive director. “The Y saved me from the world of accounting,” he used to say. Sol knew that he hadn’t been selected for his grand vision. He’d been appointed, in large part, for his organizational competence. And because he was so well liked by the board. “I don’t know anyone who didn’t like Sol,” said one member.

The Y’s board of directors is as powerful as that of any cultural institution in the city — and probably wealthier. Judith Rubin, whose husband, Bob Rubin, was formerly Treasury secretary and had been a top executive at Citigroup, served as an honorary director of the board, as did Pat Cayne, wife of Jimmy Cayne, who had run Bear Stearns. The Y, which was affiliated with the Young Men’s and Young Women’s Hebrew Association and embodied cosmopolitan New York Jewish culture, usually had a Bronfman and a Tisch on its board as well. As part of his job, Adler socialized with board members, traveled with them, but he knew his place. “I work for them,” he told Debbie.

And the work, said Debbie, “was 24/7.” Adler dropped everything if a board member called. He indulged their concerns, no matter how parochial: disappointment with seats at the gala, anxiety over admission to the Y’s prestigious preschool. (In June 2013, Andrew Tisch emailed on behalf of his grandkids.) In his iPad, Adler collected the names of everyone’s children and spouses so he could ask about them by name. He attended every *simcha*, whether birthday, bar mitzvah, or wedding. He wrote hundreds of thank-you emails and holiday wishes. “Sweet Pesach,” he wrote before one Passover to Fred Poses, one of the board’s vice-presidents. “If you asked for a favor, he would figure out some way to help,” said Fern Portnoy, a philanthropy consultant who worked with the Y. And through his caretaking of the rich and powerful, he earned their trust. Pat Cayne said, “If I had a lot of cash I had to hide, I’d give it to my hairdresser or to Sol.”

If Adler resented his role, he never showed it. He quietly went about his job, checking items off the three-column to-do list he always carried with him. He tripled the Y’s budget and pushed its programmatic offerings, bringing in high-profile speakers. Adler also excelled at an executive director’s most important task: raising money. Speaking in front of a group made him anxious — he took a Xanax before any speech — but one-on-one, few were better. “You felt like you were the only person in the world,” said Cayne. “He knew what I was interested in. You wanted to give money.” Adler brought in a series of \$5 million gifts and raised roughly \$80 million over his tenure. In December 2011, when Adler was 57, the board rewarded him with a four-year contract that paid him over \$400,000 a year in total compensation.

For Adler, the Y was much more than the place where he worked; it was his whole life. “He didn’t have a lot of friends,” said Louis, the middle son, “except people at the Y.” If the Y needed him, he postponed family dinners and vacations. “No matter what, he had to make sure the Y was okay,” explained Louis, who, like the other boys, was sometimes jealous of his father’s job. “He loved us and the Y,” said Ronnie, but the Y came first.

On weekends at home, Adler could be listless. “He’d sit on the couch and read newspapers and make notes about the

Y and email board members,” recalled Debbie. She rationalized that he was tired. “Okay, he’s entitled. He deserves his space.” Looking back, she wonders if it was a sign of depression.

**Sol Adler’s life started** to combust when an anonymous letter was sent to the Y’s head of finance and its HR director in March 2013. The letter, which appeared to come from someone with inside knowledge, detailed a corruption scheme that allegedly extended to top executives. In retrospect, though, the fuse may have been lit two decades earlier, when Catherine Marto wandered into his life.

Debbie hired Marto, an attractive divorcée then in her 30s, to help care for the Adlers’ oldest son when she started nursing school. “I was grateful to her,” said Debbie. “I knew my son was being taken care of.” Marto lived in Sea Gate and was a mother herself, and over time she became a virtual member of the Adler family. “She said she loved me like a sister,” Debbie recalled. She was also clearly enamored of Sol, though Debbie didn’t think anything of it at the time. “I always wanted to have a relationship with someone like Sol, someone who would love me,” she confided to Debbie.

In 1992, Adler hired Marto as his receptionist. “She was very hardworking,” he later said, and eventually he promoted her to his executive assistant. About ten years ago, when Marto was looking for a place to live, Debbie’s mother offered her the apartment she rents out in her house. Cathy and Sol started carpooling to work. “It made Sol’s life easier,” Debbie explained. “She could drive, so he could read what he had to read.”



The 92nd Street Y. Photo: Tirzah Brott/New York Magazine

By then, Marto's daughter was dating a man named Sal Taddeo, who had recently finished a stint in a federal prison for securities fraud. In the '90s, Taddeo had worked at a small brokerage firm controlled by the Genovese and Bonnano crime families. It was a classic "pump and dump" scheme. Employees like Taddeo manipulated stocks, driving up the price so the families could cash in before the stock crashed. Taddeo's background wasn't what a mother looks for in a prospective son-in-law, but he seemed intent on turning the page. Marto pushed Adler to hire him.

Adler knew about Taddeo's criminal record, but he later explained that hiring Taddeo was "the kind of thing the Y would do. Give someone a chance."

Taddeo started at a low-level position but rose to director of facility operations, where he earned a reputation for toughness. He didn't hide his criminal record or his ties to the mob. "He was abusive," said someone familiar with Taddeo's tactics. But no one complained. As one employee explained, "What was I going to do? His mother-in-law was Sol's gatekeeper."

According to the anonymous letter, which was later corroborated by an internal investigation, Taddeo was running a shakedown operation inside the august halls of the Y. It was his job to hire contractors to provide services for the Y—everything from repairing the building's foundation to servicing elevators. Taddeo instituted a new policy: To work

for the Y, you had to kick back something. The letter detailed the alleged payoff procedure. Checks to contractors went directly to Taddeo. When vendors showed up to collect, Taddeo escorted them to the sub-basement, where there were no cameras. He handed the check over. And then, said the letter, “we handed over their cash.”

**Adler operated in a world** where a well-timed favor could result in a multi-million-dollar donation, and a multi-million-dollar donation could entitle the giver to a certain level of special treatment. The connection between money and influence was as clear as it was unspoken. Perhaps against this backdrop, Taddeo’s behavior seemed something other than criminal. After all, Taddeo was in the business of doing favors, too. In exchange for “a donation.”

Taddeo was increasingly brazen, according to investigators, taking on contractors who’d been at the Y for decades and weeding out any who wouldn’t give him a cut. Mitchell Kurtz, an architect who’d worked for the Y for 18 years, said that in about 2008 Taddeo phoned to say that his sister was sick; could Kurtz help him out? He wanted a check for a few thousand dollars written in his name.

Kurtz was shocked and went straight to Adler. “His sister is sick,” Adler said, according to Kurtz.

Adler asked Kurtz what he wanted him to do. “Tell Taddeo to stop,” he said.

“I could do that,” Adler responded, according to Kurtz, “but there will be consequences.” Indeed there were. Kurtz didn’t pay Taddeo and lost his contract with the Y.

For years, Taddeo operated with impunity. If someone inside the Y learned of the kickbacks, he bullied them into silence. When one of his employees wanted to leave for a new job, Taddeo reduced him to tears. “You’re not fucking resigning,” he said, according to someone familiar with the conversation. In the case of executives, Taddeo had a softer touch, doling out favors. He sent contractors to work on their homes.

Adler was one of those who had work done. He later explained: “I would say to Sal [Taddeo], ‘Did you see Eddie? I need to get something done.’” Eddie is Eddie Erosa, who ran Pro Pace Construction. Erosa would then go to Adler’s home and do the requested renovations — in this case, repairs after Hurricane Sandy. Adler insisted on paying Erosa, even though Taddeo said he didn’t have to. He did, he told investigators, take a 20 percent discount. He viewed it as a courtesy, a “thank-you.”



Adler's mistress, Cathy Marto, and her son-in-law Sal Taddeo.

**On the morning of** June 7, 2013, Debbie remembers, Sol lingered in bed. He was often at his desk by 7 a.m., but on this day he couldn't get up. As Debbie lay on his chest, Sol said that he had to tell her something. "He said, 'I did something bad,'" Debbie recalled. She couldn't imagine what he was talking about.

"I did something bad with Cathy." He sounded like a child. "We did something we shouldn't have."

Debbie was furious, but she's not one to act rashly. "What am I going to do? Leave him after all these years of building a family together?" she told me. "He said he didn't love Cathy. He said it meant nothing. He said it was over." Debbie chose to believe him. Besides, by then, he'd been diagnosed with depression. "I knew he was very fragile at that point," she said. And she knew he was scheduled to talk to investigators in a few hours. "I didn't want to make it any worse for him."

Before Sol left, he had one question for Debbie. He knew he would be asked about the affair by investigators. Marto had been asked and had denied it.

"If I know, I don't care who else knows," she said. "Tell them the truth."

After he arrived at the Y, Adler was questioned for a couple of hours by Mark Lerner, a former federal prosecutor who was leading the Y's internal investigation for the law firm of Marc Kasowitz, a large donor to the Y whose wife is on the board. Adler seemed anxious and preoccupied. Taddeo had been fired by that point, and at least one of his shakedown schemes had come to light. "If I go down, you're going down too," he told Adler at the time, according to investigators. But Adler denied he'd ever had reason to question Taddeo's methods. "Never about Sal's honesty, integrity. I got questions about him being stubborn," Adler said.

Toward the end of the interview, Lerner asked him if he had ever been engaged in an affair with Cathy Marto.

"Yes," said Adler. He told Lerner that the affair had begun more than 20 years earlier. "It started modestly, well



before she started working at the Y,” he said. It was on and off for two decades, though he said it had ended a year earlier.

As Adler spoke, his body language changed. He seemed defeated. He knew the affair made it look like he was complicit, or at the very least like he had ignored Taddeo’s behavior to please Marto. At the end of the interview, he made a stab at explaining himself. “The questions you asked, they’re logical but they never influenced anything,” he said. “Any of the mistakes I’ve made in life, they were always kept at a distance from the institution.”

**As the investigation progressed,** Adler’s emotional state plummeted. Often he couldn’t get out of bed, except when it came to the Y. “Then he turned it on. It was incredible,” said his son Matt. In June, though, he reached a breaking point. “I can’t do it anymore,” he told Debbie. On June 19, 2013, he sent an email to board president Stuart Ellman, saying that he was taking time off to deal with medical issues. “Please take the time you need to get better,” Ellman responded.

Adler checked himself into Silver Hill in New Canaan, Connecticut, hoping to find a combination of medications that would relieve his depression.

On July 1, 2013, investigators reported their findings to the 13-member executive committee. They concluded that Taddeo had extorted hundreds of thousands of dollars from contractors and that Adler had, at a minimum, looked the other way. They were going to turn the evidence over to the D.A.’s office. Many on the committee had known Adler for years and were heartbroken to hear the report. Matthew Bronfman had a particularly close relationship to him. “Sol made him feel like he was very important, not just a donor but a person with principles and commitment,” said a person who knew them both. In return, Bronfman paid for a symphony composed in honor of Adler’s years of service to the Y. Still, even Bronfman agreed that Adler had to go. The committee voted unanimously to let him resign. If he refused, he’d be fired.

In early July, Adler checked himself into the hospital again, this time at Maimonides in Brooklyn, where he stayed for two weeks. To some board members, the timing of Adler’s hospitalization was awfully convenient, as if he were trying to avoid the fallout of his actions. Later, officials at the Y claimed they couldn’t reach Adler to inform him of the board’s decision, though email records show that he was in touch with some members of the staff during that time and had left Debbie’s cell-phone number with Ellman.

Finally, on July 19, Fred Poses called Adler’s home on behalf of the board. It was after 5 p.m. when Debbie picked up. Poses came quickly to the point. Sol had a choice: resign or be fired. Debbie told him that Sol was in the hospital and couldn’t be reached at the moment. “Well, in that case, he’s fired,” Poses said, according to Debbie’s complaint. There was to be no severance; the Y cut off his medical benefits the following month. (Marto told people she’d already been fired by email; neither she nor Taddeo responded to multiple requests for comment.)

At 6:39 p.m. that day, no more than an hour after Poses’s phone call, an email went out to all employees of the Y announcing that Adler had been fired. The undisclosed affair was cited as the reason, but the implication was that Adler was connected to a web of corruption.

Debbie couldn’t believe that the institution to which Sol had dedicated his life had treated him so callously in the end. She blamed Poses, who’d worked closely with Sol for years. But she reserved special enmity for Kasowitz. On June 29, she and Sol had attended Kasowitz’s 60th-birthday party at a horse farm. “He said Sol would be okay if he told the truth,” said Debbie.

“They had his cell-phone number and email. They could’ve gotten in touch with Sol or waited till he was out of the hospital,” said Wigdor, who claimed in the complaint that in their rush, Y officials breached Adler’s contract, which called for him to be given 30 days to respond to allegations before termination. “They threw him to the wolves,” said

Matt. “They abandoned him once he wasn’t useful.”

For its part, the board, in a statement, said that the last thing the Y wanted to do was to dismiss its longtime leader, but that Adler’s “egregious conduct” left no other option: “Our hearts went out to the Adler family.” Still, at least one board member, Pat Cayne, resigned to protest how Adler had been fired.

The next day, Debbie and the boys went to see Sol at Maimonides. He hadn’t yet heard the news. “We had to fire our father from a job he held for 38 years,” Ronnie said. Sol was stunned and mostly silent, sitting in a chair in his sweatpants. “I can’t believe they did it that way,” he said. “It was the only time I ever saw him angry at the Y,” said Ronnie. But then Sol turned his attention to his family. “How are you?” he asked.

After the firing, Adler was barely recognizable to those closest to him. He was distracted and forgetful. Some days he stayed in bed for 18 hours. There were small victories — “I went to the beach,” he would say, “I took a walk” — but, for the most part, he told Debbie, he was in pain every minute of every day. “I know you don’t think I’m fighting to get better,” he said, “but I am.”

A couple of times, he reached out to an old connection, Fern Portnoy, the philanthropy consultant. “He wanted to put his life back together. But he couldn’t see his way to do it,” said Portnoy, who counseled patience. “He needed to let time pass. The public needed time to forget.” She asked if there was anyone he could call for a favor. But he said no: “My whole life was the Y.”

Even after everything that happened, he would still look at the New York *Times*, and if he saw something about a board member, he’d send a note — Mazel tov, your children look beautiful. He’d never get a response.

*\*This article appears in the November 17, 2014 issue of New York Magazine.*