

A full-page photograph of George Bochetto, a middle-aged man with grey hair and glasses, wearing a dark blue suit jacket over a white shirt. He is sitting in a large, ornate, dark wood armchair with green leather upholstery. Behind him is a large window with multiple panes, and to the left, an American flag on a stand. The office walls are green and decorated with various framed pictures, including a map and a sign that says "BOCHETTO ESQ".

— ON THE —
RECORD

THE PHILLY MAG CONVERSATION

 George Bochetto at his Center City office

FIGHT FROM THE RIGHT

On the heels of forcing SEPTA to cancel its drastic cuts, headline-making attorney George Bochetto prepares for new battles.

INTERVIEW BY VICTOR FIORILLO

He came from quite literally nothing to become one of Philadelphia's wealthiest lawyers and most prominent local Trump supporters. And before jetting off to vacation in Italy, Temple Law alum George Bochetto sat down with us to talk U.S. troops on Philly streets, the return of the Rizzo statue, and how he beat SEPTA.

Thanks for squeezing me in before you dash off to Italy. Is it a regular destination for you and your wife, Christy? We go there twice a year, ever since I discovered my biological family.

Okay, hold up. You *must* elaborate. [Laughs] I grew up in an orphanage in New York. The state always had a ban on learning who your biological parents were. But I went back to the orphanage about 12 years ago and brought a donation check, and they gave me a *little* bit of information. Nothing improper. But it was helpful. And then I hired one of the country's leading ancestry researchers, and we found them.

Why was it so important for you to figure this out as you were approaching 60? If you grow up in an orphanage, you want to know the who, what, why, where, when, and how.

So you figured out the who. What about the rest? My biological mother and biological father grew up in Postiglione, Italy, on opposite ends of town, my mother on the poor end and my father on the wealthy end. They had a relationship that neither of their parents approved of. My mother planned to immigrate alone to the U.S. to work at a seamstress shop in Brooklyn. There was a going-away party for her in town, and that's where I was conceived. But she didn't know it. She got on a ship and went to Brooklyn, and it wasn't until three months after the

party that she realized she was pregnant. Back then, an unwed, pregnant young girl was shameful, so she placed me in an orphanage. She eventually wound up married in Texas with children. My biological father went about his life and got married and had three children of his own. So I have two half-brothers and a half-sister in Italy and two half-brothers in Texas.

How much was that check for? [Laughs] \$25,000.

My son asked me who I was interviewing. I told him George Bochetto. Being 19, he has no idea who you are. I said, "He's the guy who just made your daily Regional Rail commute much easier than it would have been."

“We need solutions, and if the leadership isn't going to attempt to find the solutions, that's an invitation for the president to step in.”

And he said to say thank you. You tell your son that I am so glad that it worked out the way that it did, for him and the rest of the region, especially people who *need* SEPTA for survival.

You persuaded the judge to force SEPTA to reverse course on its drastic cuts, and you did it right quick. **How?** My team and I discovered so much misinformation in the SEPTA narrative of “the sky is falling,” which was basically all to blame Republicans in Harrisburg so Democrats could flip the Senate at next year's midterms. And to do that, they pushed these rollbacks, which punished so many people: workers, students, employers.

I know you had a two-day hearing in front of the judge. We don't have two days here. Can you briefly sum things up? In 2007, Senator Vincent Fumo sponsored Act 44, which essentially set up a stabilization fund for SEPTA to account for any betwixt and between that happens after SEPTA passes its budget and before Harrisburg passes its budget—the Harrisburg budget almost always being late. SEPTA can tap that fund to keep the services going. I discovered the fund, discovered it had over \$300 million in it. I put Fumo on the stand, he explains all this. Then I questioned the head of SEPTA and their CFO, and SEPTA completely fell on itself. If you read the transcript, you will see what buffoons they were. They

couldn't get out from under themselves.

Another recent case of yours involves the Frank Rizzo statue. You sued the city over its removal, and the city is now going to return it to the committee that fundraised to create the statue in the first place. What happens next? The city has to pay for some repairs, and then we will be making an announcement as to its placement. Our committee includes former mayor John Street, Bob Brady, and other luminaries.

My understanding is that it cannot be in public view. Well, actually, we think it *can* be in public view. It will have a very prominent, appropriate setting.

Facing the Columbus statue in South Philly's Marconi Plaza? [Laughs extensively] Well, I didn't say that. [More laughing] You're very, very close. Warmer than lukewarm.

Rizzo: best mayor ever? I dunno about *that*. I think Ed Rendell has to be taken into consideration. And this may sound unlikely for a Republican to say, but I have a great deal of respect for John Street. He's smart. He's savvy. He knew how to get shit done, quote unquote. I'm also happy to talk worst mayor.

Do, please. Well, it used to be Wilson Goode, but he was surpassed in virtually every respect and dimension by that wino Jim Kenney.

Wow, don't mince words, George. You also “saved” the aforementioned Columbus statue in South Philly and the incredibly ugly Columbus monument at Penn's Landing—I also, by the way, got Columbus Day back as a city

holiday. The Commonwealth Court agreed 7–0 that Kenney had no authority to cancel Columbus Day.

So did that ruling also eliminate Indigenous Peoples’ Day? Technically, it does eliminate that, but only because Kenney established that date as Indigenous Peoples’ Day in the same order that has now been invalidated. But listen, we Italian Americans are 100 percent in favor of Indigenous Peoples’ Day. It just doesn’t need to be on the exact same day as Columbus Day.

It’s clear to me that you and I have much different politics, for the most part, but I actually agree with your overall legal position when it comes to these statues. There was a time when people were just ripping down statues left and right all across the country, without following any kind of process. You’re exactly right. Couldn’t have put it better. Kenney had zero authority to tear down the statue in the middle of the night.

But now we see that President Trump is targeting monuments and exhibits across the country, including “The Dirty Business of Slavery” at Independence National Historical Park, because he doesn’t like the narrative that they present; they don’t conform with his version of history. Does that give you pause in the same way? I think the narrative shown in exhibits like that is incredibly important and needs to be told. In decades past, it hadn’t been adequately told or told at all. Slavery and the role it played in society and economics, that *needs* to be shared.

Did you vote for Trump each time he ran? No. I voted for him in 2016 and Biden in 2020



Bochetto at a forum for Republican candidates for U.S. Senate at the Pennsylvania Leadership Conference in 2022

because, foolishly, I believed Biden was going to unify two extremes—the far right and the far left—but he did a terrible job and turned out to be incompetent.

Unlike some of my liberal friends, I haven’t purged my address book of all Trump voters, only some. And I have to say, some of my more conservative friends are wondering if they made a mistake, when they see things like Trump putting himself out there as Robert Duvall’s character in *Apocalypse Now*, saying, “I love the smell of deportations in the morning,” with a graphic of military helicopters flying over Chicago—Listen, unfortunately, we have major urban areas with hyper-progressive district attorneys who are

refusing to prosecute criminals properly, who are advocating for cashless bail, who are putting criminals back on the street who shouldn’t be back on the street, and what Trump is saying is enough is enough. If our local government can’t protect its own citizens, isn’t that what the federal government is for?

Actually, no. I don’t think that the president should be rolling troops into American cities to deal with crime, and the Constitution might back me up on that. I don’t want American troops in American cities, but we also don’t want dangerous gangs full of illegal immigrants roaming the streets and destroying businesses and torturing our women.

I’m sorry, but do you actually believe that we have gangs full of quote-unquote illegal immigrants roaming the streets of Philadelphia and torturing our women? Yeah, I do. I also think some of those

gangs are inspiring domestic gangs as well, and there is gang warfare out there as a result. How many people want to take a walk down North Broad Street at midnight?

There are many streets in the city that I don’t feel comfortable walking down at midnight, and that has nothing to do with gang warfare or immigrants, but neither do I want to see American troops lining Broad Street with M16s slung on their shoulders. I’m not saying that’s what I want, either. But crime is out of control.

But George, are you aware that the homicide count this year in Philadelphia is on track to be the lowest it’s been since the 1960s? Or are you one of those Republicans who think that the city is fudging the numbers? I don’t think the city is fudging the numbers. I am delighted that those numbers are down as much as they are. But then you have the complete lack of



From left: The Christopher Columbus monument at Penn's Landing; a *Philadelphia Daily News* article on Bochetto's ending his mayoral campaign in 1998.

illegal gun enforcement, the total lack of enforcement of people just walking into stores and taking things—

I literally see that *all* the time. Right. And then there is the total failure to stop what's happening with all the prostitution in service of drug addiction that is happening in Kensington. Larry Krasner doesn't want people arrested for prostitution. It's the law! Why won't he enforce the law?

I think there are many good reasons to not just start locking up prostitutes left and right. I'm not saying you need to lock them up. The *arrest* is what is important, and then they can be put in treatment centers. But we aren't even making the arrest. We are just letting it happen. And as far as violent crime goes, the reality is that so much of it is Black on Black, and that's just not acceptable. This is affecting so many

people and families who are trying to take part in the American Project and are overwhelmed by drug dealers and gang members and bad influences.

Trump's crackdown in D.C. has clearly impacted the crime problem there, and I've seen more than a few people of color from "bad" neighborhoods in D.C. saying that they welcome what Trump is doing. Absolutely.

But that also reminds me of one time that I visited Haiti, and some of the older Haitians said they were nostalgic for the days of Papa Doc, because the streets were safer. Right.

Of course, Papa Doc was also a cruel dictator, and you might have gotten kidnapped and tortured or killed in the middle of the night by his Tonton Macoute. Well, I am certainly not in favor of cruel

dictators or people being kidnapped in the middle of the night. What I am saying is that we need solutions, and if

"I don't want American troops in American cities, but we also don't want dangerous gangs full of illegal immigrants roaming the streets and destroying businesses and torturing our women."

the leadership isn't going to attempt to find the solutions, that's an invitation for the president to step in.

George, we're just going to have to disagree on this and move on. Okay.

I'm not going to ask you your net worth, but my research shows me that you own multiple properties in Rittenhouse. And then there's that multimillion-dollar beachfront condo in Florida. So how did you go from an orphanage to significant wealth? Hard work. Hard work. And hard work. Plus a few lucky breaks along the way. But you can in this country come from nothing and become very wealthy. I have made a great deal of wealth, and I also spread it around pretty good too. But the opportunities *are* there. Unfortunately, there are folks in some situations that don't get a fair



➤ Bochetto at his first meeting with his biological father, Francesco Langone, in 2015 in Battipaglia, Italy, along with his biological siblings

opportunity because of their skin color, which can play such a big role in who gets to work hard and get ahead and who has a harder time doing so. But as someone who does not hold an elected position, I can only do so much.

I have to be honest: I don't know if you are making an argument in favor of people of color or if you are making some anti-DEI argument in favor of white people. No. I'm talking about people of color who genuinely have a harder time participating.

Okay, phew. Because otherwise, this interview was about to go off the rails. You mentioned elected positions. You once ran for mayor but dropped out in favor of Sam Katz becoming the Republican nominee. And in 2022, you, for some reason, ran for United States Senate and got barely

one percent of the vote— [Laughs] Thanks so much for reminding me, Victor.

Sure. What I wanted to ask you was: Why on earth did you make that run? I just wanted to be an alternative. I think I would make a fantastic United States senator. I have the fiscally conservative rule-of-law conservatism properly balanced with the appreciation of the struggles less fortunate people go through. I was working in gas stations and washing dishes while other kids were going on ski trips or trips to Florida. I never went on any of those. I never had a birthday party as a kid. So I get it. That's an unusual balance to have in public service these days. So, yes, I put up \$1 million of my own money, and then Mehmet Oz and Dave McCormick each put up many millions more than that, and you cannot downplay the significance that money plays in political contests. It's unfortunate.

What's your report card on the guy who did fill that spot, Democrat John Fetterman, someone who has pissed off a lot of his own party?

It's refreshing that he's gotten away from the ultra-progressive far left. He's being sensible and not letting ego get in his way. He's not afraid to admit that a Republican can have a good idea. He's willing to at least listen. With some Democrats, they won't even listen to your ideas. It's just lunacy.

Other than the more recent cases we already spoke about, one prominent case of yours I am very familiar with—and, as a journalist, very interested in—is when you sued *Sports Illustrated* for writing that Philly boxer Tex Cobb fixed a fight and then did cocaine after it. You won a judgment of \$10.7 million for Cobb, but that was

overturned on appeal. Can you explain why? The court did find that what *Sports Illustrated* wrote was false. The reporting was a completely incompetent canard. But *Sports Illustrated* appealed on the basis of *New York Times v. Sullivan*. Basically, in a libel case, an ordinary citizen only has to prove falsity. A public figure has to prove that the statement was intentional, deliberate lying. I tried that case for four weeks in front of a federal jury and won. And an appeals court overturned it after a 15-minute oral argument. *New York Times v. Sullivan* is horrible, and the Supreme Court needs to overturn it.

Trump agrees with you on that, and, once again, I couldn't disagree with you more, but we're running out of time. [Laughs]

I know that Christy is a practicing lawyer as well. What's it like having two lawyers in the same house? It's ... interesting.

I bet. We talk about many different subjects, and we disagree about many different subjects and issues, so all of that disagreeing *really* hones your advocacy skills. Hers are *extremely* good. And mine? Well, she's made mine better.

Spoken like a good husband. Thanks for your time, George, and enjoy your trip. I thank *you*. You are a great interviewer. The magazine should really give you a raise. **P**

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.