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Donald Trump's 'Original Apprentice'

By ANTOINETTE MARTIN

BEFORE his boardroom tactics became a reality show, before "you're fired" became a world-famous tag line, back in 1990 when Donald Trump was married to his first wife, he hired Billy Procida. While Mr. Procida was already a young real estate developer, he got the job only after a decade of pleading to serve an apprenticeship.

Like the seat-of-the-pants entrepreneurs on the Net Worth team in this season's version of "The Apprentice," in which high school grads compete with college grads, Mr. Procida leapt immediately into the business world after high school. Like the Net Worth crew, he managed to pile up superlative credentials and an impressive net worth quickly.

Unlike them, however, it took him 10 years of ceaseless campaigning, starting the moment he left 12th grade, to get a call from the chief of the Trump Organization.

"I started writing him letters when I was 18," recalled Mr. Procida, seated in a comfortable chair in his spacious corner office here, where he is a principal in Palisades Financial, a real estate investment firm. "I started out by asking him for 10 minutes of his time."

Mr. Procida, who was christened William, but answers only to Billy, is a 5-foot-6-inch cigar-smoking Roman candle of a personality. He claims he was born with a big ego to compensate for being a "short Italian."

He said he began identifying with Mr. Trump in his young teens before he was politely invited to leave Bergen Catholic High School and sent to public school in Tenafly. Mr. Trump was "the best, the biggest deal around" in the business that Mr. Procida learned from his father growing up in Alpine.

Ten years after high school, when Billy, then 28, finally got to spend a year with "the Donald," he said the most telling lesson he gleaned was about his own cocky attitude: keep it up, or you won't get anywhere.

"People say Donald is arrogant," he said, "but people confuse confidence with arrogance. He creates a perception with his attitude -- the Trump factor, they call it. I quickly



Timothy Ivy for The New York Times

A YEAR WORKING FOR THE MASTER

Billy Procida, already a developer, spent 1990 at Trump Organization.

saw that his buildings were selling for 25 percent more than exactly the same building put up by somebody else. That's because he created the perception: Trump is the best."

Mr. Procida, who is now 42, started his own career as a builder, constructing a small housing project that his father had approval to build on the East River banks in the Bronx and that was over to him as a graduation present. "My father never pushed me about grades," said Mr. Procida, whose three siblings went to college, "but he expected me to know how many cubic yards of concrete it would take to build a foundation by looking at a set of plans."

Two years into the Bronx job, despite his father's fierce criticism that he was overreaching, Mr. Procida had transformed the project and inflated it to fulfill his own outsize vision. Working with his three-man start-up crew, he created plans for White Beach, a \$9 million condo project near the Throg's Neck Bridge, featuring "dock-ominium" units with boat slips, an idea that he claims he invented. Then, he managed to borrow enough to actually build it. All sorts of people were impressed, including New York City housing officials, and the project led to a series of ever-larger contracts, including one to build public housing in the South Bronx.

"I just always knew what I was going to do," Mr. Procida said, flicking away an ash from his Fuente and speaking in a voice gone gravelly after 15 years of shouting at work crews, followed by almost a decade

of dealing forcefully with builders who use his bank's money.

"I would always yell, scream, bust my butt, and anybody else's, to get things accomplished," he said with a satisfied smile. Of his investment banking career, he added simply, "I've closed over \$2 billion in deals, and never has one of my borrowers failed."

By the time he actually heard from Mr. Trump, Mr. Procida said, he had written more than 100 letters to the Manhattan mogul.

While Mr. Trump was hitting his giant stride, developing the Trump Towers, casinos, hotels and a glittering national reputation, Mr. Procida tried to keep him informed about each of his own triumphs. "Sorry you missed this one," he would write, attaching a news clipping about a successful project. "I'll keep you in mind next time."

In return, Mr. Procida always received a congratulatory form letter. Still, it was a response, said Mr. Procida, who defends Mr. Trump's persona in seemingly every aspect. "What those form letters over the years said to me was," Mr. Procida said, "Don't give up."

On the day of Mr. Procida's marriage, Oct. 25, 1985, New York magazine published a lengthy profile of the young developer and his amazing early successes, headlined "The Boy Who Would Be Trump." When he got back from his honeymoon, his mother let him know that Mr. Trump had at last called him, suggesting he "get in here" to see him in Manhattan.

For the next five years, Mr. Procida said, he served in an unofficial and unpaid capacity as "Trump's little mascot."

"He would send me over to look at projects for him," Mr. Procida said, "and he would let me hang around. I'd go to industry meetings, and Donald's got his arm around me, calling me 'baby Trump.'" Eventually, Mr. Procida persuaded Mr. Trump to take him on as a vice president.

Today, 15 years later, it is a bit unclear how the employment ended. When Mr. Procida appeared on "The Today Show" last year, he said he had been fired by Mr. Trump after a year as "the original apprentice," but the experience had nonetheless given him a tremendous boost. In an interview 10 days ago, however, Mr. Procida said he had asked Mr. Trump to hire him a "a year, just one year."

In any case, the year of 1990 was a rocky one for Mr. Trump -- the separation from Ivana, the slump in the real estate industry, lenders nipping at his heels -- and a highly beneficial one for Mr. Procida.

Procida Construction, which he ran with his brother Mario at the time, was named New York City Developer of the Year just four years after Mr. Procida parted ways with Trump. "I could never have achieved that without the connection to Trump," he said. "It wouldn't have happened."

A year later, he founded the company that is now Palisades Financial. "When I was with Donald, I learned I didn't have to be the guy who is keeping track of every doorknob," he said. "I learned I was good at seeing the big picture, and knowing what makes a project fly."

Today, the blackboard in Mr. Procida's office is always full of multimillion-dollar projects vying for his attention -- for example, the redevelopment project in downtown Montclair that was recently granted a construction mortgage.

Mr. Procida still sees his old boss at various business affairs, he said, and he still loves to regale people with his story about being the untelevised apprentice. The experience still gives him extra cachet, he admits unabashedly.

"Even with my daughter!" he laughed. "She's 9 years old, and she has a big picture of Donald Trump on her wall."