

Courting a prez pardon?

Issue at cop-bribe trial

By KAJA WHITEHOUSE

President Trump's pardon power was used to impeach a witness at the NYPD bribery trial Thursday.

The pardon issue came up when a defense lawyer asked the government's key witness, Jona Rechnitz, about his "politically connected" father's support of Trump — followed up by a question about whether Rechnitz was planning to seek such a reprieve from the commander in chief.

The comment caused an uproar, including objections from prosecutors, who called it "outrageously prejudicial" and demanded that it be stricken from the record.

But defense lawyer John Meringolo argued that it was a legitimate question because Rechnitz's dad had attended a Trump fundraiser in 2016 — and was caught on wiretap telling his son they would "just go down to Washington" to fix Rechnitz's legal woes.

"They have a relationship

in real estate," Meringolo told the judge about Rechnitz and Trump. "They have a long-standing relationship."

Manhattan federal prosecutor Martin Bell argued that the conversation about going to Washington occurred before Trump was elected, and slammed questions identifying political affiliations as unfairly prejudicial.

But the judge declined to strike it, or Rechnitz's "no" answer.

Rechnitz is the government's star witness in a case alleging far-reaching bribery at the NYPD. He has testified that he teamed up with Borough Park police liaison Jeremy Reichberg to shower cops with lavish gifts in exchange for perks, including parking placards.

Meringolo represents Reichberg's co-defendant, former NYPD Deputy Inspector James Grant, who stands accused of providing police escorts and helping the men secure gun permits in exchange for gifts.

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'Choke' nanny on stand

A nanny on trial for attempted murder testified Thursday that she didn't stuff a baby wipe down a 2-month-old boy's throat.

Marianne Benjamin-Williams, 47, said the little boy suddenly started gasping for air on May 18, 2017.

"I just thought it was going to be his last breath," she tearfully told Manhattan Supreme Court jurors. "Every moment, I thought I was going to lose him."

But she insisted she "never tried to kill" the infant.

Assistant DA Nicole Blumberg grilled her about the lies she told Dr. Salo-

mon Blutreich and his wife, Meredith Sondler-Bazar, to land the baby-sitting gig.

She confessed that she lied on her résumé and provided fake phone numbers for her references.

For one reference, she admitted she begged a school-teacher friend to pose as a man named John Polakoff.

Her pal told Blutreich on the phone that Williams had cared for his kids for nearly two years — but he actually had no children.

"I lied to get a job," she said. "I did a desperate act, which I will forever regret."

Rebecca Rosenberg



BILLY GOAT: The Islanders' decision to use a Billy Joel (bottom right) song about a Long Island fisherman as inspiration for their new logo in 1995 led to a terrible marketing move. Their "Gorton's fisherman" (above) look turned the NHL team into laughingstocks. They soon ditched the logo and mascot Nyisles (opposite right) for their classic logo (near right) and mascot Sparky the Dragon (far right).



HOOK, LINE Islanders' fisherman

By REED TUCKER

It was all Billy Joel's fault.

In 1995, the New York Islanders decided to freshen the team's look by introducing a new logo, jersey and mascot. The decision eventually turned into one of the biggest sports-marketing disasters of all time and a debacle that still rangles local hockey fans decades later.

"It was a last-gasp attempt to rejuvenate a small-market team on the brink of collapse, and it failed due to poor planning, penny-pinching, miscommunication and misfortune," says Nicholas Hirshon, a journalism professor at William Paterson University and the author of the new

book "We Want Fish Sticks: The Bizarre and Infamous Rebranding of the New York Islanders" (University of Nebraska Press, out Dec. 1).

The Islanders had once been a powerhouse team that won four straight Stanley Cups in the early 1980s. But by the '90s, it had lost steam. The underperforming club got swept by their hated rivals, the Rangers, in the 1994 playoffs, and attendance at the dilapidated Nassau Coliseum was flatlining. Equally alarming was the team's appalling merchandise sales: The Islanders ranked 24th out of 26 NHL teams in apparel dollars.

The team's ownership group decided change was required.

"They needed to get

new fans, but they couldn't afford arena upgrades or to buy good players," Hirshon says. "The easiest way to make a quick buck is to change the jersey around."

In 1988, the Los Angeles Kings had trumpeted their acquisition of Wayne Gretzky by unveiling a new silver-and-black look. They rocketed from last to first in merchandise sales, leaving other sports franchises desperate to emulate that success.

And so, the Islanders set out to ditch their logo — a map of Long Island with the letters NY emblazoned on top — which had been with the team since its founding in 1972.

They hired a Manhattan firm, Sean Michael Edwards Design, and attempted to answer the toughest question: What exactly constituted an "Islander?"

One exec joked it should be a





& STINKER

rebranding reeked of disaster

woman carrying a Bloomingdale's bag stepping out of a Lexus. No obvious candidates presented themselves for such a diverse community.

And this is where Billy Joel comes in. The Long Islander had in 1990 released the song "The Downeaster 'Alexa,'" which detailed the plight of a local fisherman who was struggling with a dwindling catch and tough regulations.

The team's ownership liked the idea of incorporating the island's seafaring heritage into the team's identity and saw the Joel song and its video, featuring weathered boatmen, as a direction to follow.

A designer eventually created an image of an older, bearded man in a rain slicker and oilskin hat holding a hockey stick.

The team rushed to unveil the new look to the public, but failed

to do any focus-group research.

"If you would have thrown that image out to a group of kindergartners, they would have said this is the Gorton's fisherman," Hirshon says.

The new jerseys debuted in the 1995-96 season, and fans and detractors alike immediately noticed the resemblance to the frozen-food icon. One dismayed supporter hoisted a banner at the Coliseum reading, "Fish sticks are for dinner, not our logo."

THE Islanders also introduced a new mascot. Nyisles (pronounced "Niles") was a 7-foot fisherman caricature with a 15-pound plastic head and a red flashing light atop his head. He fell as flat as a flounder.

Fans booed him at his debut, and one 10-year-old boy was quoted as

saying, "I'd like to assassinate him. I think he's stupid."

Rob Di Fiore, the man inside the costume, who was paid \$75 per game, was subjected to endless abuse. At one game, a young boy punched him and kicked him in the groin.

An angry Di Fiore changed into street clothes and later found the boy in the stands. He bent down and whispered in the child's ear, "I know who you are." The kid never bothered him again.

The disastrous marketing moves were not helped by the team's performance. The Islanders finished in the division cellar.

Fan reaction to the logo change continued to be just as hideous. The team's manage-

ment caved to the pressure and was ready to change back by the end of the season. But the NHL, worried retailers would be stuck with an unsellable product, made the team keep the fisherman around for a second season.

Although the reaction to the jersey change was overwhelmingly negative, the shift actually had helped sales.

The Islanders sold some 10,000 fisherman jerseys in the 1996-97 season and moved up to 17th in overall NHL apparel sales.

But the fisherman was soon drowned for good. The NHL gave the Islanders permission to wear their original jer-

sey for up to 15 home games in the 1996-97 season before abandoning the revamped look entirely the following year.

"It was clear that this logo brought out such strong feelings, that they wanted to move past it as quickly as they could," Hirshon says.

"For years, it was whitewashed. There would be no merchandise available. You'd go around the arena and there wouldn't be any photos of players wearing the jersey. There was nothing."

One of the main lessons from the disaster was about timing.

"You really want to rebrand when you have a winning team," Hirshon says. "It's not a Band-Aid to cover up when you're losing. Fans will see right through that."

That and never turn to Billy Joel for marketing advice.

