

Donna Adelson, the Murdering Mischief-Maker

Part One: Long before Donna Adelson allegedly paid to have her son-in-law killed, she appeared on Wheel of Fortune and solved a puzzle: "Mischief-Maker"



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JAN 04, 2026 • PAID



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From left: Rob, Charlie, Harvey, Wendy and Donna Adelson

There's a rare club you never want to join. Not that you join it, exactly. No, this is a club you get dragged into—in stunned silence—and it is a horrible place. I know this because I'm a member.

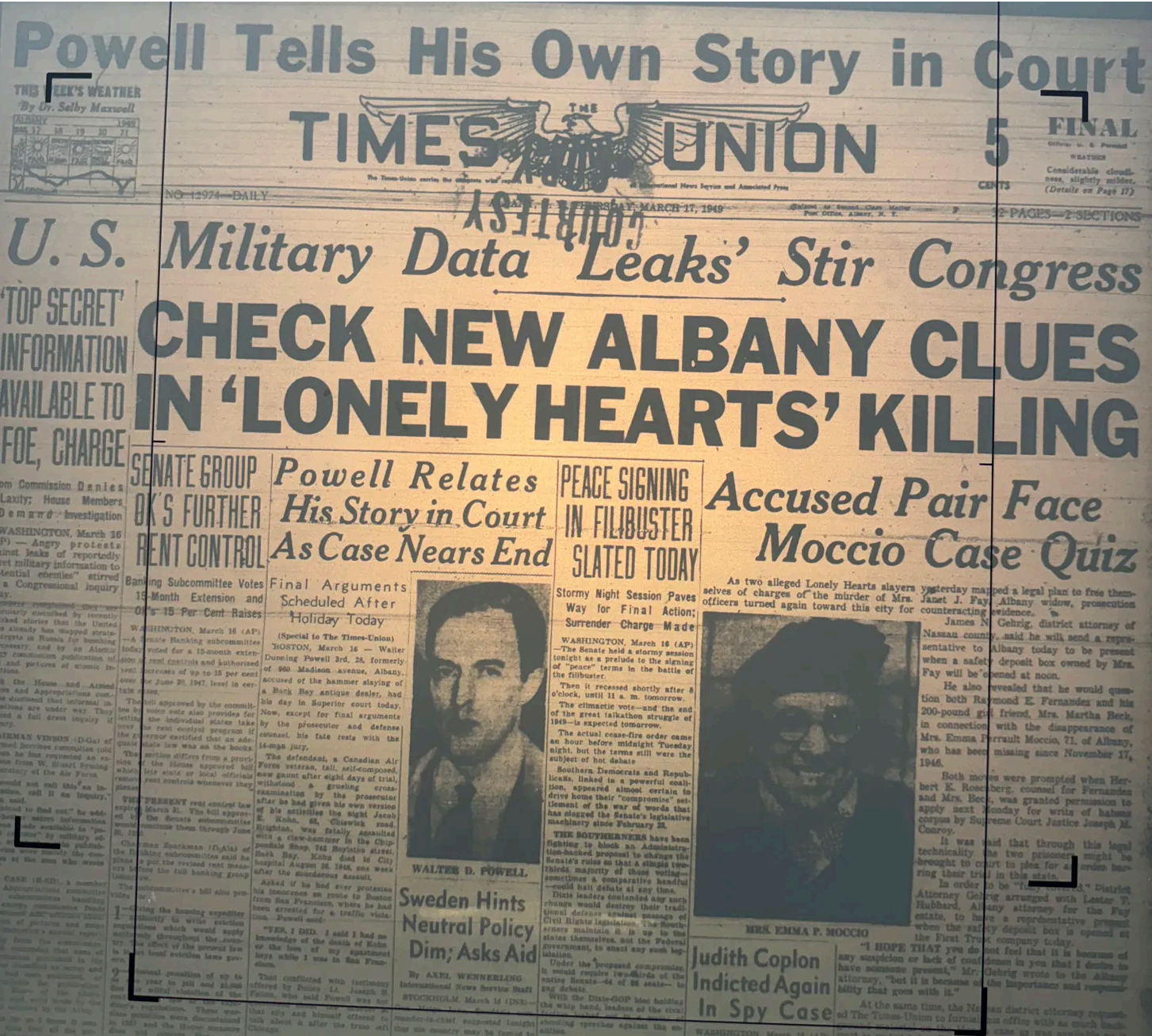
The initiation is simple: A parent convicted of the ultimate crime. Murder. That's your sponsor. That's your inheritance.

In 1947, long before I was born in 1965, my father was accused of a horrific murder in Boston. The crime—the hammer killing of an elderly antiques store owner—became a cause célèbre, in part because my father was handsome, well-off, a decorated war hero. The newspapers loved him. A leading man in a real-life noir. It became national and international news when he fled Boston and led law enforcement on a cross-country chase through the United States and into Canada before being apprehended, finally, in San Francisco.

His trial was one of the largest in Boston history. His conviction would forever fracture my family along fault lines that would take decades to reveal themselves fully. My father died in 1976. It was not until 1995—nearly two decades after his death, nearly half a century after the crime—that I learned he had actually committed it. But even before I knew the truth, I

understood its consequences. I didn't meet many members of my paternal family until I was ten years old. The crime had scattered us like shrapnel. We were still finding pieces of ourselves in unexpected places, generations later.

Welcome to the club, Dr. Adelson. I'm so sorry you're here.



A newspaper covering my father's trial. His case was often listed above the masthead.

It was over ten years ago. I was CEO of Capital Region Special Surgery, doing the work that administrators do—budgets, personnel, the mundane machinery of keeping a medical group afloat. Late one afternoon, one of our ENT surgeons appeared in my doorway, still in scrubs. Dr. Awwad closed the door behind him with the deliberate care of someone carrying gossip too explosive for hallways.

He had news, he said. But I had to keep it secret. Yes, the irony of a person spilling another's secret lecturing another about trust and secrets did not escape me.

A new physician at a rival practice across town—a Dr. Robert Adelson—was about to become famous or should I say infamous. His mother, Dr. Awwad reported with barely suppressed glee, was under investigation for hiring someone to murder her son-in-law.

He was vibrating with that particular energy people get when someone else's catastrophe arrives gift-wrapped as entertainment. The details were delicious, weren't they? A prominent South Florida family. A law professor gunned down in his own

driveway. A bitter custody dispute. Hitmen. Hitmen! In Tallahassee, of all places. It was the kind of story that made you feel better about your own messy divorce, your own difficult mother, your own family dysfunction. At least your people hadn't commissioned a murder.

I had a different reaction.

I looked at Dr. *Smith** and felt the particular chill of recognition—not of the crime, but of what was coming. Whatever awaited the Adelsons—the investigations, the trials, the media circus, the true-crime podcasts, the Dateline specials—would only be the beginning. The public spectacle was merely the overture. The real sentence would be served by everyone who shared their name, for generations. Children not yet born would carry this. Grandchildren would Google it. The stain doesn't wash out. It just fades, slowly, until it looks like something that was always part of the fabric.

I knew, because I had lived it. Because I was still living it.

Dr. Robert Adelson—the estranged son, the one who had broken free, the one who had married outside the faith and been excommunicated from the family for his independence—was about to discover that you can never run far enough. That geography is no protection. That the people you flee can still drag you into their wreckage, simply by sharing your blood and your name.

He hadn't spoken to his mother in years. He lived in Albany, New York now. He had built a life, a career, a family of his own choosing. None of it would matter.

This is a story about Donna Adelson—the “domestic coordinator,” the doting grandmother, the matriarch who allegedly orchestrated a murder of her daughter's ex-husband because she couldn't bear to have her grandchildren live five hundred miles away. But it is also, inevitably, a story about the people she leaves in her wake. The children who will testify against her. The grandchildren who will grow up knowing what she did. The son who escaped her orbit only to be pulled back in, under oath, to describe the mother he had spent years trying to forget.

Murder is a crime against the victim. But it is also a crime against everyone the murderer ever loved—a betrayal so profound that it rewrites the past even as it poisons the future. Every memory becomes suspect. Every act of tenderness carries a question mark. Was she capable of this even then? When she drove me to tennis lessons? When she helped with my homework? When she told me she loved me?

I know these questions because I have asked them about my own father. I know they have no satisfying answers.

What follows is the story of how Donna Adelson became the woman who allegedly paid to have her son-in-law killed. It begins, as these stories always do, with a version of ordinary life that looked, from the outside, like the American Dream.

This is the first of a series.



Donna Adelson on Wheel of Fortune

In 1986, a perfectly coiffed woman from Coral Springs, Florida, stepped onto the set of Wheel of Fortune and, when Pat Sajak asked what she did for a living, offered an answer that would later feel less like a quaint job description and more like a confession.

“Well, I’m a domestic coordinator,” she announced, her smile calibrated to project warmth but not too much warmth, competence but not too much competence. She explained that she was “responsible for the activities, classes, and lessons” of her son Robert, 16, Charlie, 12, and Wendy, 10—as well as her husband Harvey, sitting obediently in the audience, and even the family dog, Sam. Everyone was accounted for. Everyone was managed. That was the point.


What phrase did this domestic coordinator successfully solve that day, earning herself \$2,900 and a moment of national television glory?

Mischief-Maker.


The gods of irony, it seems, had already begun taking notes.

Donna Sue Adelson was born in 1950, or thereabouts—she has always been a touch coy about exact dates—and raised in New York City during that postwar era when Jewish families from the boroughs were clawing their way toward respectability with the fierce determination of people who understood what it meant to have nothing. Her parents instilled in her what family friends would later describe as an almost theological commitment to education, achievement, and keeping one’s children close. Very close. Dangerously close, as it would turn out.

She attended Queens College, that great brick proving ground for strivers who couldn't quite afford the Ivies but possessed all the same fire in their bellies. There, Donna trained to become an elementary school teacher—a profession that, for a young woman of her era and background, represented both independence and impeccable feminine virtue. She could work, yes, but with children. She would nurture. She would shape. She would, in her own small classroom kingdom, control.



DONNA JACOBS
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HARVEY ADELSON
Jamaica, New York
Biology

↑ *CUNY Queens 1971*

COLLEGE SENIOR PICTURES

Buffalo 1966 →

It was at some point during these years that she encountered Harvey Adelson, a fellow New Yorker who had graduated from the University of Buffalo before earning his dental degree at Temple University. Harvey was, by all accounts, a classic specimen of his generation: a man whose ambition was directed almost entirely toward professional success, content to leave the emotional architecture of family life to his future wife. Donna, one suspects, recognized this arrangement as advantageous.

They married in 1971 and, like thousands of other young professional couples during that decade, heard the siren song of South Florida—that land of low taxes, endless sunshine, and subdivisions that promised middle-class families a fresh start wrapped in a palm-tree-lined bow. Coral Springs, their eventual landing place, was precisely the

sort of planned community that would have appealed to Donna’s sensibilities: tidy, upwardly mobile, and full of other young families from the Northeast seeking to reinvent themselves beneath the subtropical sun.

“We were among a lot of young families from the Northeast who found Coral Springs, a city in the country, with a lot of promise,” recalled Dr. Ben Graber, a family friend who knew the Adelsons for four decades. The pattern was familiar: husbands would open their practices; wives would run the front office, keep the books, manage the domestic sphere with the precision of field generals. Donna fit the template perfectly—except, perhaps, for an intensity that friends would only later recognize as something more than ordinary maternal devotion.

She gave up teaching to focus on Harvey’s budding dental practice and on the three children who arrived in steady succession: Robert in 1974, Charles in 1976, and Wendi in 1979. The Adelsons settled into their five-bedroom home on a cul-de-sac, and when Robert expressed an interest in tennis, Harvey installed a court in the backyard. Newspaper photos from the era capture the couple dancing at charity balls and fundraisers, Harvey beaming beside local politicians, Donna elegant and watchful at his side.

The dental practice flourished. By the late 1980s, Harvey was running splashy advertisements for his “cosmetic and restorative dentistry” services, promising “free smile evaluations” and cutting-edge techniques “as seen on ABC’s *Extreme Makeover*.” He eventually rechristened the operation the Adelson Institute for Aesthetics and Implant Dentistry—a name that dripped with aspiration, suggesting not merely teeth but transformation. Donna kept the books, managed the staff, signed the checks. Behind every successful man, as they used to say, though in Donna’s case “behind” may not have been quite the right preposition.

To the outside world, the Adelsons were, as Graber put it, a “five-star family.” Donna shuttled her children to their lessons, monitored their grades, and orchestrated their trajectories with the attention to detail of someone who understood that nothing in this life—certainly not success, certainly not loyalty—could be left to chance. Wendi would go on to graduate magna cum laude from Brandeis, earn a master’s at Cambridge, and receive her law degree from the University of Miami. Charlie would follow his father into dentistry, becoming a periodontist. And Robert, the eldest, became an ENT physician.

But Robert, in the cruelest of ironies for a woman who defined herself by keeping her family close, was the one who got away—though not before Donna extracted her pound of flesh.

The story, pieced together from court records and the *Over My Dead Body* podcast, unfolds like a parable about the limits of maternal control. Robert fell in love with Dr. Haritha Challapalli, a fellow physician, Indian-American and Hindu—not Jewish, not what Donna and Harvey had envisioned for their firstborn son. They became engaged.

And then, through what sources describe as Donna's "interference," the engagement ended. Robert, dutiful son that he was, capitulated. He married someone else—"a nice Jewish girl," as one account put it—the kind of woman his parents could approve of, could display at synagogue, could fold into the family portrait without disruption.

That marriage ended in short order.

And then Robert did something that must have felt, to Donna, like the ultimate betrayal: He went back. He married Haritha after all. He chose love over obedience, his own judgment over his mother's. He moved to New York, joined a medical practice in Albany, started a family with the woman he had wanted all along. And he stopped speaking to the people who had tried to prevent it.

"He chose to lead a life of his own choosing, including his spouse," court records would later note, with the bloodless language the law reserves for family annihilation. Robert was, in the parlance of those who study such dynamics, the one who broke free from the centrifugal force of his mother's love—a love that, like certain unstable elements, could warm a home or level it entirely.

But here is the thing about escape: it is never total. Robert had extricated himself from Donna's orbit, but he could not extricate himself from her crimes. In August 2025, he would take the witness stand in a Tallahassee courtroom and testify against his own mother—describing her controlling nature, her hatred of Dan Markel, her strange incuriosity about who had murdered her former son-in-law. The son who got away was dragged back, under oath, to help put her away forever.

What makes Donna Adelson's early life so fascinating, in retrospect, is not its exceptionalism but its utter recognizability. She was the product of an era and a class that prized a particular kind of motherhood: devoted, sacrificial, and ultimately about control disguised as love. She was the woman who described herself as a "domestic coordinator" without a trace of irony, because that was precisely what she was. She coordinated. She orchestrated. She ensured that everyone—husband, children, dog—remained in their proper places, moving through their proper lessons and activities, advancing toward their proper futures.

The trouble, of course, came when someone refused to be coordinated. When her daughter Wendi married Dan Markel, a brilliant but strong-willed Florida State University law professor, and when that marriage disintegrated, and when Markel insisted on shared custody of his sons and refused to let Wendi relocate them 500 miles south to be near her family—near Donna—the domestic coordinator found herself facing a variable she could not control.

But that is a story for the next installment. The early Donna—the Queens College girl, the young teacher, the dental practice bookkeeper, the Wheel of Fortune contestant—was simply a woman doing what women of her generation were taught to do, and doing it with a ferocity that seemed, at the time, merely admirable.

“Mischief-Maker,” she had shouted that day in 1986, solving the puzzle, winning the prize.

The wheel kept spinning. And spinning. And spinning.

Coming-up Next Part 2: *That Day*

Of course it didn’t begin that day. It’s just that particular day you saw it for what it was: savagery. Dan hunted down like...well, *prey*, I guess you’d say.

It was July 18, 2014, Dan was shot in his garage by two men who followed him home from a gym after he had dropped his children off at daycare. He died the next day.

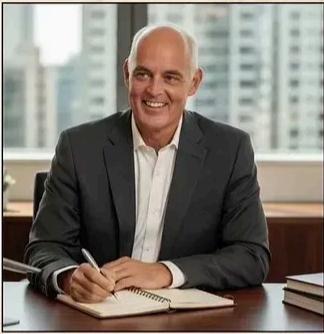
It wasn’t until 2025 that the mastermind of his death, Donna Adelson, got sentenced.

But, as I said, it didn’t start that day. So let’s take a look back in time and what happened on Dan’s last day.

These are not the Bradys.

*Dr. Smith is not his real name. I’m not protecting him, trust me. I just don’t want the flood of emails. But under the right circumstances needing to verify this account, I can be reached at: josh@thepowellhousepress.com

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Note: Some biographical details about Donna Adelson’s early life (birthplace, education at Queens College, career as an elementary school teacher before marriage) appear across multiple sources with minor variations. The 1986 *Wheel of Fortune* appearance and the phrase “Mischief-Maker” are documented in archival footage referenced by Court TV and the *Tallahassee Democrat*. Details regarding Robert Adelson’s estrangement from the family due to his marriage outside the Jewish faith were reported in the *Over My Dead Body* podcast and subsequently cited in court records and news coverage of the 2025 trial.

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