

High-profile cases elevate attorneys to upper levels of prominence

By Martin Kasindorf and Jayne O'Donnell
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"Get me Giesler!"

That was the cry in Hollywood during the 1940s and 1950s. Whenever celebrities got into trouble, they called criminal defense lawyer Jerry Giesler. Charlie Chaplin and Zsa Zsa Gabor were among his clients.

In the wake of the acquittal that Tom Mesereau, 54, won for Michael Jackson on Monday in his child-molestation trial, famous criminal suspects in California and other states are likely to order their underlings to "get me Mesereau!"

"He's been launched into the stratosphere," says Laurie Levenson, a professor at Loyola Law School in Los Angeles. "He will be the name *du jour*, the go-to guy in high-profile cases, for at least the foreseeable future."

There is room for Mesereau at the top. Johnnie Cochran was the best-known courtroom lawyer in the USA when his client, O.J. Simpson, was acquitted on two charges of murder in 1995. Cochran died March 29 at age 67.

Some big names have had lower profiles in recent years. They include F. Lee Bailey and Wyoming-based Gerry Spence. Few lawyers, if any, are left as name brands.

"The question is, who is Johnnie Cochran's heir apparent? Now the answer is obvious," says Dana Cole, a Los Angeles defense lawyer who attended law school with Mesereau and has tried cases with him.

Mesereau will be joining such well-known lawyers as Joseph Tacopina, who has been described in *The New York Times* as "the Donald Trump" of New York's defense bar. He has represented former New York police commissioner Bernard Kerik, and got a post-trial acquittal for one of four policemen charged with the torture of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima in 1997.

"Tom was always a good lawyer," Tacopina says. The Jackson win "doesn't make him a better lawyer, but it's likely to elevate his status."

Ben Brafman, a prominent New York criminal defender, was fired from Jackson's defense team along with Mark Geragos in the spring of 2004 when Geragos was spending much time on the Scott Peterson murder case. Brafman is known for the 2001 acquittal of rap mogul-performer Sean Combs, then known as Puff Daddy, on gun-possession charges in New York.

"The Jackson acquittal for Mesereau will be viewed as one of the high points of his career," Brafman says. "It should catapult him to a new level of prominence."

Tacopina says there is always a risk with high-profile cases. "When you lose, you lose hard," he says.

Robert Morvillo wasn't able to keep Martha Stewart out of prison, but that hasn't hurt his standing. He was quickly hired by embattled former AIG insurance chairman Maurice "Hank" Greenberg when scandal enveloped him.

Geragos, a Los Angeles lawyer, has had a mixed win-loss record since he first came to prominence. He got felony charges against rap-

per Nathaniel Hale, known as Nate Dogg, dismissed. He got alcohol counts dismissed for Roger Clinton, brother of the former president.

But client Winona Ryder was convicted of shoplifting in Beverly Hills. And he lost the Peterson case when the jury in Redwood City, Calif., found the fertilizer salesman guilty last year of murdering his wife, Laci, and their unborn son.

Levenson says Geragos' recent setbacks in court won't hurt him professionally. "People remember a name more than whether he won or lost," she says.

Other hot — or still prominent — legal lions:

► **Gerald Schwartzbach.** The Mill Valley, Calif., lawyer defended actor Robert Blake, who was acquitted in March of fatally shooting his wife, Bonny Lee Bakley. "It was a significant victory and received a fair amount of attention," Schwartzbach says. "The Jackson trial got more attention, so Tom's going to get more attention."

► **Roy Black.** The Miami lawyer successfully defended William Kennedy Smith in his highly publicized Palm Beach, Fla., rape trial in 1991. He has defended actor Kelsey Grammer and sportscaster Marv Albert. He's defending radio talk-show star Rush Limbaugh on charges of prescription drug fraud.

► **Bruce Cutler.** The New York lawyer won three acquittals for crime boss John Gotti during the 1990s. After Cutler was forced off the defense team, Gotti was convicted and died in prison in 2002. Last August, Cutler took over the murder case of Phil Spector, 65, the legendary rock-music producer who goes on trial in Los Angeles in September in the shooting death of actress Lana Clarkson, 40, in 2003.

► **Leslie Abramson.** An attorney best known for defending Erik Menendez in two murder trials. Erik and his brother Lyle are serving prison terms for murdering

F. Lee Bailey: Part of the "Dream Team" defense in the 1994-95 double-murder trial of O.J. Simpson.

their parents in Beverly Hills. Their first trial ended in a hung jury in 1994. The second trial ended in conviction in 1996.

► **Mark Holscher.** Holscher defended Los Alamos nuclear-weapons scientist Wen Ho Lee when the government charged him with espionage. Lee finally pleaded guilty to a single charge of mishandling government secrets, and a federal judge apologized to him for the overzealous conduct of the government. Holscher now represents former Enron CEO Jeffrey Skilling.

► **Mickey Sherman.** The New York lawyer unsuccessfully defended Kennedy cousin Michael Skakel in 2002 for the 26-year-old murder of Martha Moxley in Greenwich, Conn.

► **John Keizer.** The San Francisco-based lawyer negotiated former

Enron CFO Andrew Fastow's plea deal and represented investment banker Frank Quattrone through two trials on obstruction of justice charges. The first resulted in a hung jury, and the latter ended in a conviction that is being appealed.

In the specialized world of Washington white-collar defense, there's Abbe Lowell, currently defending lobbyist Jack Abramoff and his links to House Majority Leader Tom DeLay. Plato Cacheris represented Fawn Hall and Monica Lewinsky.

Reid Weingarten became well-known after his successful defense of former Agriculture secretary Mike Espy and former Teamsters president Ron Carey. After he landed WorldCom CEO Bernie Ebbers as a client and won an acquittal for Tyco general counsel Mark Belnick, Weingarten joined the upper echelons of corporate lawyers.

Weingarten sees his status as a blessing, despite an expected long stretch in Houston next year defending former Enron chief accounting officer Richard Causey, who is being tried with Skilling and former CEO Kenneth Lay.

"High-profile cases often arise where law, politics and the media intersect," Weingarten says. "This sometimes provides tactical opportunities that wouldn't exist in a case no one knows about."

Contributing: César G. Soriano
► **Telling Jackson's side, 1D**

