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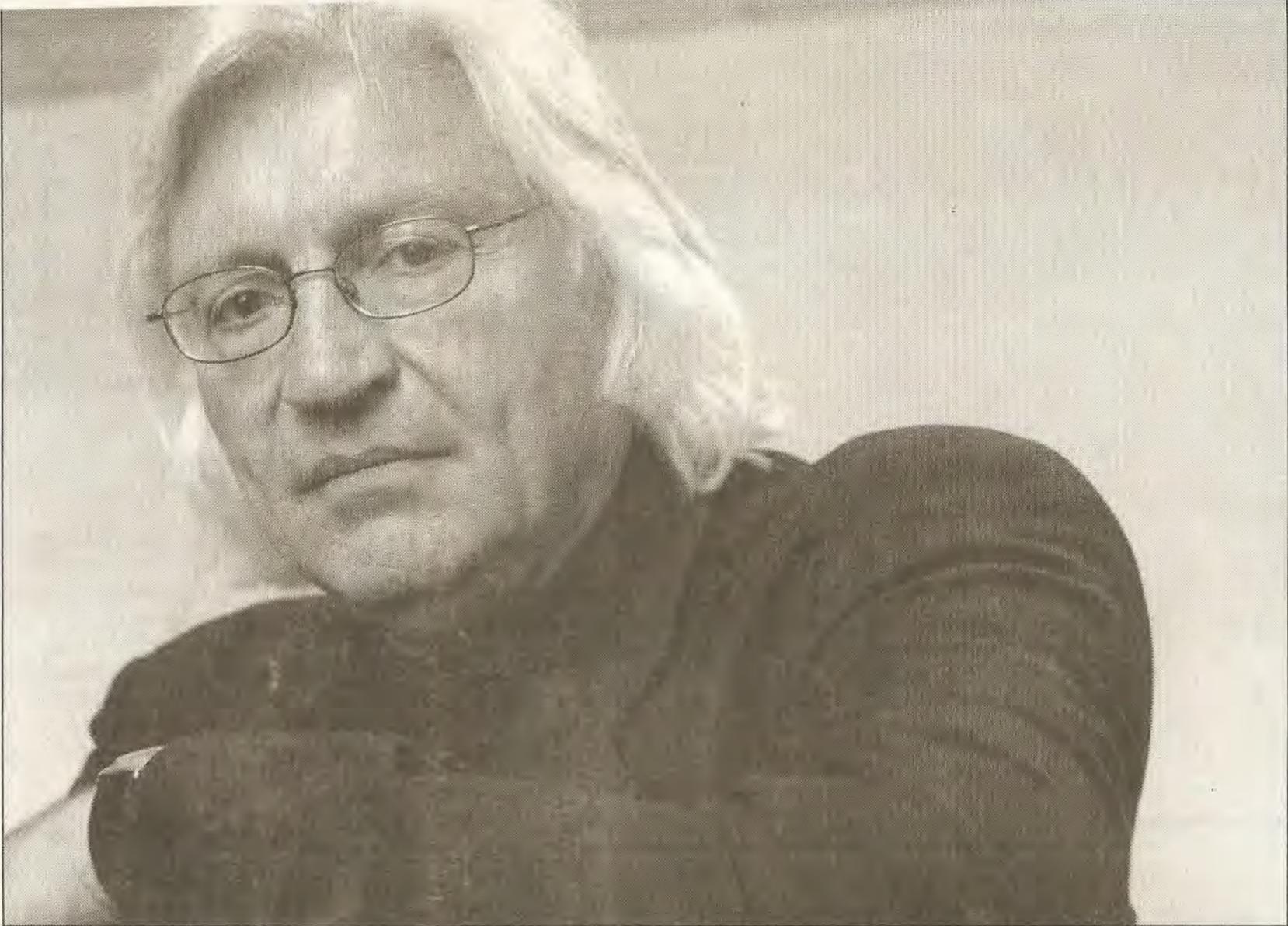
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HUGH WILLIAMS / Daily Journal

"I don't want to be known as a celebrity lawyer, and I don't want to be known as a Hollywood lawyer. I want to be known as a civil rights lawyer who fights for justice," Thomas Mesereau Jr. said of his future after Michael Jackson's acquittal.

Lawyers Shine in Celebrity Light

High-Profile Clients Improve Their Attorneys' Practices

By Erin Park

Daily Journal Staff Writer

It doesn't matter whether you win or lose; it's how you looked on TV.

Most experts agree that's true for attorneys in California, where they're hired to defend the likes of an A-list actress with a penchant for stolen Chanel, a Peter Pan-esque pop star throwing slumber parties for adolescent boys, and a washed-up '70s actor accused of shooting his wife to death.

There are few instances, experts say, in which lawyers who take on such cases have difficulty attracting new clients afterward, even if they lose.

"It's better to be known as a winner than a loser, but it's basically just how well you're known," said Laurie

Levenson, a professor at Loyola Law School.

Shawn Chapman Holley of the Cochran Firm was part of the team of attorneys who helped get football legend O.J. Simpson acquitted during his 1995 double-murder trial.

Holley, who attributes her steady stream of work as a TV legal analyst to that trial, speculated that Los Angeles' "cult of celebrity" may have something to do with it.

"People just presume that, if you're an attorney who for whatever reason is on television or that somebody with any money or power chose you, that is somehow validation in and of itself," she said.

David Conn, who successfully prose-

cuted Lyle and Erik Menendez for the 1989 shotgun slaying of their parents, agreed.

"I think generally a high-profile case can help an attorney's business even when the attorney doesn't win the case," Conn said. "You just have to be ready for the close attention, and watch everything you do and every word that you say."

But Mark Geragos, whose name is practically synonymous with "celebrity attorney," said it's not always that simple.

Geragos admitted that his bottom line hasn't suffered since his most recent high-profile client, Scott Peterson, was

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Mesereau Considers Life After Jackson Trial

Thomas A. Mesereau Jr. walked Michael Jackson out the front door of the Santa Maria Courthouse in June and instantaneously became one of the best-known criminal defense attorneys in the nation.

Reporters from London to Osaka, Japan, wrote gushing profiles of the 55-year-old, silver-maned college boxer. Mesereau demanded — and got — Jay Leno to suspend Michael Jackson jokes for the night before the lawyer agreed to appear on "The Tonight Show."

Although Mesereau previously defended Mike Tyson and Robert Blake in criminal matters, the attorney built his legal career in Los Angeles defending local no-names, most of whom couldn't afford to pay a dime for their defense.

He helped found a legal clinic at the First AME Church in South Los Angeles and annually spends his own money to defend a capital murder case in the Deep South. Mesereau sat down with Daily Journal City Editor David Houston and reporter Erin Park last week to

Q&A

reflect on Jackson's case and how it might change his life and practice. After a much-needed vacation, Mesereau plans to leave his practice, Collins, Mesereau, Reddock & Yu, to start a new practice with his sidekick in the *Blake* and *Jackson* cases, Susan Yu, that will handle a mix of criminal defense and civil work.

But first, he had scores to settle, with reporters, prosecutors and even his own pastor. He especially wanted to register disgust with other lawyers he believes feast off the carcasses of their big-name clients. Here's some of what he had to say:

Q: Do you think your newfound fame will change you?

A: I hope it doesn't change me in any substantial way. Frankly, I don't want to be known as a celebrity lawyer, and I don't want to be known as a Hollywood lawyer. I want to be known as a civil rights lawyer who fights for justice. [But] there are certainly benefits to being well-known; there are also liabilities.

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