

Jackson's Legal Team Undergoes Shake-Up

A Homecoming of Sorts for Attorney

Thomas Mesereau is working for Michael Jackson after turning him down last year.

By JEAN GUCCIONE
Times Staff Writer

The irony has not been lost on his friends.

Thomas A. Mesereau Jr. last year turned down the chance to represent pop star Michael Jackson on child molestation charges because he didn't want to shortchange another celebrity, actor Robert Blake, a client awaiting trial on murder charges.

But Jackson eventually felt shortchanged by his legal team and retained Mesereau last weekend. The lawyer had an open calendar because he quit the Blake case in February, citing "irreconcilable differences" with the former "Baretta" star.

"Things just kind of work out," said Angela Reddock, one of the law partners at Collins, Mesereau, Reddock & Yu in Century City. "You get what you're supposed to get."

Mesereau said Monday that he would not comment on the case "out of respect for the judge and his gag order." He replaces Mark Geragos and Benjamin Brafman as lead counsel

for Jackson.

Jackson and his new lawyer are due in Santa Barbara County Superior Court for arraignment Friday. Mesereau said he expected to make his first public comments about the case after that hearing, expected to last just a few minutes.

Despite his stint working for Blake, Mesereau, a native New Yorker, is still a relatively new face on the celebrity lawyer circuit — and even among his peers in Los Angeles.

"He's not interested in being on TV," said attorney Dana M. Cole, a classmate from Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco.

Cole and other colleagues say Jackson — who said Monday that he wants "the full attention" of his legal team — has picked the right attorney for the job.

"When he takes on a client, any client, he devotes his entire existence to that client," said Mansfield

Collins, a Mesereau law partner. "He commits to a case with an undivided sense of loyalty."

That loyalty extends to his many friends and community commitments. Mesereau is a dedicated volunteer at the First African Methodist Episcopal Church in Los Angeles and has represented four accused killers in the Deep South for free.

"He is one of our most faithful volunteers," said Michael Aismow, director of the FAME



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BEFORE: Robert Blake, left, confers with Thomas J. Mesereau Jr. On the actor's murder case since late 2002, Mesereau left in February, citing "irreconcilable differences" with his client.

Legal Clinic, held every other Sunday at the church's Renaissance Center.

Blake hired Mesereau, in part, because he admired the lawyer's dedication to representing poor and minority clients. So did Jackson, Cole said.

Collins said his colleague takes cases that other lawyers won't because he believes every defendant deserves the best representation he can provide.

Mesereau has won two acquittals for clients on Alabama's death row. In one racially charged case, a homeless black man accused of killing a 21-year-old white woman was freed from jail.

Mesereau also worked out a deal for a mentally ill defendant in Mississippi who confessed to a killing during the commission of a home invasion robbery. The

man received a sentence that would make him eligible for parole after seven years in prison.

Closer to home, Mesereau defended former Compton City Councilwoman Patricia Moore, who was sentenced to 33 months — 24 months less than federal prosecutors had sought — in prison for extortion and income tax fraud in 1997.

Two years later, a judge dismissed investment fraud charges against another Mesereau client, Larry Carroll, a former KCBS-TV Channel 2 newscaster. And San Bernardino authorities declined to file rape charges against boxer Mike Tyson, whom Mesereau represented during a 2001 criminal investigation.

Prosecutors in the Blake case declined to comment on Mesereau's courtroom perform-

ance.

"I was taught if you don't have anything nice to say about a person, you don't say anything at all. I have nothing to say about Mr. Mesereau," Deputy Los Angeles County Dist. Atty. Shellie Samuels said.

Mesereau will face a contempt hearing next month in Burbank for his zealous representation of Blake during a jailhouse deposition in a civil wrongful-death case.

With that case mostly behind him, Mesereau had an unexpected break in his schedule that made it possible for him to now take Jackson as a client.

"It's ironic that Blake made this possible," said veteran attorney Harlan Braun, the first of four criminal defense attorneys who have represented the actor.

'Things just kind of work out. You get what you're supposed to get.'

Angela Reddock, law partner at Collins, Mesereau, Reddock & Yu