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Star Lawyer Deeply Committed to Deep South

By STEVE CHAWKINS
Times Staff Writer

BESSEMER, Ala. — For Tom Mesereau, there hasn't been much middle ground lately: It's been either glitz or grits.

Mesereau, a big man whose crown of white, shoulder-length hair is about as commonplace in Alabama courts as a powdered wig, is the lead attorney for pop star Michael Jackson. He usually practices in Century City, roughly a million miles from Bessemer's courthouse and the sea-

food gumbo at the Bright Star restaurant nearby.

But here was Mesereau one sweltering afternoon last month, hoping to effect a sudden change of fortune for a 53-year-old body shop owner who was facing a possible death sentence.

Charged in a conspiracy to commit murder, Glenis Latham was ushered into the Jefferson County courtroom in his red-and-white striped jail uniform. He had been held without bail for 11 months. Hours later, he was a free man, heading home to

a plate of his sister Deshelah's corn bread and black-eyed peas.

With help from Mesereau and Birmingham, Ala., defense attorney Charles Salvagio, Latham's murder charge was reduced to criminal conspiracy to possess marijuana — a transformation on the order of a noose being turned into a rubber band.

The outcome suited Mesereau just fine. Since 1999 he has handled six Alabama and Mississippi death penalty cases at his own expense. All of the clients have been acquitted or con-

victed on lesser charges.

Mesereau, 54, initially volunteered for duty in the Deep South through an American Bar Assn. project. In an interview, he said he was doing what he could to keep defendants from dying at the hands of the state.

"I truly believe that many impoverished people don't get proper representation," he said. "As lawyers, we're blessed to have these opportunities."

Death penalty opponents say such opportunities abound in [See Mesereau, Page B11]

And when a Birmingham jury acquitted Terry Wayne Bonner, a homeless mentally ill black man, of killing a young white woman, Mesereau's local co-counsel received death threats.

Mesereau had summoned an expert on eyewitness identification to challenge a former Miss Alabama who said she saw the nighttime shooting from an apartment window eight floors up. The 21-year-old dead woman's father, William Temple, is still upset: "I found it surprising he'd come all the way from California to represent a homeless man, a drug addict, a man who was on the streets despite having a wife and three or four children, a man who, I have no doubt, murdered my daughter," said Temple, an insurance agent in Mobile. "I don't know what he was trying to achieve, other than being a big-name lawyer."

Last month in Bessemer, attorneys on both sides of the Latham case knew exactly what they wanted to achieve.

It had already been a tumultuous day in the courtroom of Circuit Judge Mac Parsons. A jury had come back with two murder convictions against Charles Tinker, a drug dealer described by prosecutors as "the godfather" of Bessemer's underworld.

Latham, who worked on Tinker's cars, had refused to testify against him, frustrating prosecutors who had hoped he would talk when they charged him. Latham, prosecutors claimed, was part of a conspiracy because his shop allegedly was the place where Tinker and others plotted the killings of two rivals.

Prosecutors later said their case against Latham, who had no criminal record, had fallen apart because of witness intimidation.

Mesereau scoffed, saying the mild-mannered Latham had intimidated no one. In court, Latham stood before Parsons, flanked by Salvagio and Mesereau. A crew from the TV show "Celebrity Justice" had cameras rolling. In the hallway earlier, Mesereau had obliged a woman who asked for his autograph on a news story about the case.

Agreeing to a deal hammered out by the attorneys after a week of negotiation, the judge gave Latham a boilerplate explanation of his right to a trial on the marijuana charge. Quietly, Latham declined, preferring to plead guilty and take a sentence of time already served.

A former state senator with a wry sense of humor, Parsons accepted thanks from attorneys on both sides. As the cameras focused on Mesereau, Parsons addressed the defendant.

"It shows what you can do by hiring a good, sharp lawyer — from Birmingham, Alabama," the judge said, nodding toward Salvagio.

The courtroom erupted in laughter.

Mesereau beamed. Two days later, he and the judge attended church together.

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Mesereau Donates Time in South

[Mesereau, from Page B1]

Alabama, where convicted killers receive the sentence more often than in 43 other states.

"The state has a serious problem with the quality of representation, which often leads to more death sentences," said Richard Dieter, executive director of the Washington D.C.-based Death Penalty Information Center.

Unlike most other states, Alabama provides no money or lawyers for death penalty appeals, he said.

Raised in New York, Thomas Mesereau Jr. had no previous connections to the South. Now he rhapsodizes about the food and the manners, chuckling at liberal California friends who issue dire warnings about his safety before each trip. Sometimes he attends services at Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church, where a 1963 bombing killed four young black girls.

Still, Mesereau, a Harvard graduate whose client list has included celebrities such as Mike Tyson and Robert Blake, is an outsider.

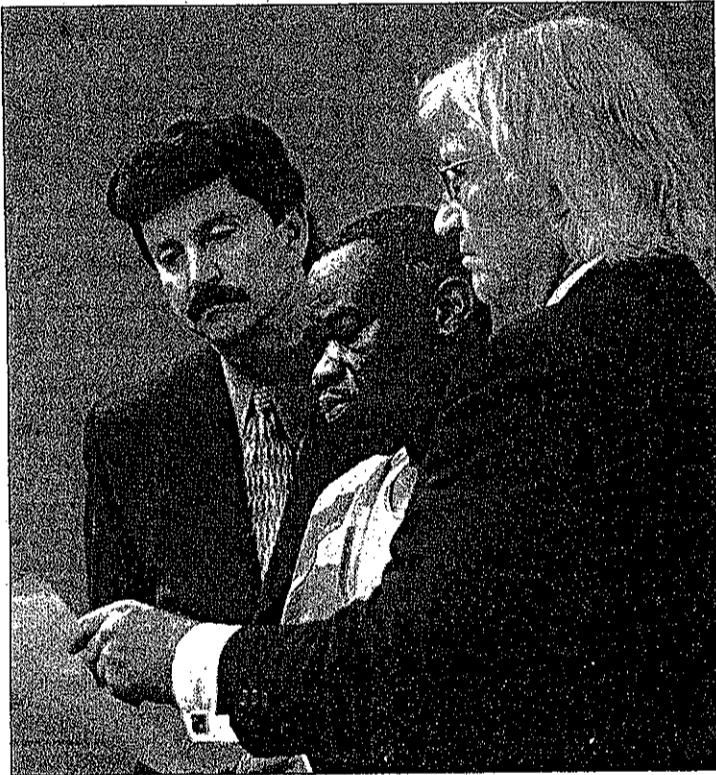
In one trial, a prosecutor derided him as "a Hollywood fraud." But Mesereau dances away from such jabs like the amateur boxer he used to be. His colleagues say juries have not been put off by his celebrity.

"When prosecutors have tried the home-cookin' thing, it's backfired," said Salvagio, Mesereau's partner on several cases.

"Tom's just a decent person, and that decency shines through no matter where he's at."

Whether Mesereau will sway jurors in the Jackson child molestation case is, of course, unknown. Bessemer is 2,000 miles and a world away from the fans, the camera crews, the commentators, the superheated throngs attending to the self-styled King of Pop's every move.

Gutted by the collapse of the U.S. steel industry, the city of 29,000 has a downtown heavy with sagging bungalows, boarded-up windows and abandoned commercial buildings. Despite new revenue from a publicly financed amusement park called Visionland, the city has been mired in hard times, its population shrinking by a third since its heyday.



GARY TRAMONTINA/Associated Press

DEFENDERS: Tom Mesereau, right, and Charles Salvagio, left, with client Glenis Latham in Bessemer, Ala., last month.

Mesereau has done three cases in Bessemer, two in Birmingham and one in the south Mississippi town of Columbia.

A defendant there named Melvin "Mook" Anderson, a former resident of five mental institutions, had been charged with fatally shooting a man in a drug deal gone bad. His defense was assigned by the courts to Greg Pierce, a 24-year-old attorney who had only recently started handling felony cases.

Eager for help, Pierce called Mesereau but didn't figure anything would come of it.

"L.A.? Please!" Pierce scoffed. "I couldn't even get someone out of Hattiesburg!"

But Mesereau flew in, with Salvagio and a frequent colleague, Birmingham attorney Wilson Myers. Prosecutors were persuaded to accept a guilty plea in return for a life sentence.

"I think they got a little scared of Tom," Pierce said. "They knew he wouldn't be a cakewalk. If I was alone, they would have stomped all over me and Mook would be on death row."

Mesereau has brought more than star power to his cases, according to his colleagues.

In the trial of Sarah Crawford, charged with killing her 22-month-old daughter, Mesereau had a photo of her ex-boyfriend blown up and propped in a corner of the courtroom. He said that after a couple of days prosecutors objected to it, but by then jurors had been staring from morning till night at the man whom defense attorneys claimed was the real killer.

"It was as if he was presiding over the trial," Mesereau recalled with a chuckle.

Crawford was acquitted of murder and given a 20-year sentence for manslaughter.

In Mesereau's most dramatic Southern case, he helped spring Wesley Quick from death row for two murders he did not commit. Going through a mistrial and then a conviction, Quick appealed and was granted a new trial in 2003 — one that showcased Mesereau's zeal for antagonistic witnesses.

In Quick's earlier trials, a government witness was on the stand for less than an hour, Salvagio said. Mesereau, though, took all day to question him, believing the man had threatened to kill Quick's family if Quick failed to take the murder rap.

"Tom's a great cross-examiner," Salvagio said. "He asked questions like: 'Isn't it true you're into satanic rituals? Isn't it true you've looked around for people to kill?'"

When a prosecutor objected that the questions were irrelevant, Mesereau pointed to the witness, declaring, "The relevance, your honor, is that this man is the killer!"

Quick's mother, Renaldi Vines, still gets chills recalling that moment.

The witness "leaned back in his chair, kind of puffed his chest out, got a big smile on his face, and nodded his head in agreement," she said. "And the jury saw it."

But victory was bittersweet: The witness was not prosecuted. Quick, then 26, was acquitted of

Tom's just a decent person, and that decency shines through no matter where he's at.

Charles Salvagio,
Birmingham attorney

murder but sentenced to 76 years for three home burglaries. He is appealing that sentence.

Some of the victories chalked up by Mesereau and his local partners have triggered outrage.

Many Alabama residents were angered when Crawford, the mother accused of fatally beating her toddler to death with a candy-filled soda bottle, escaped death in "Big Yellow Mama," the state's brightly painted electric chair.