

Attorney of the Week Jack Swerling



Photo by Ann Blencowe

By Ann Blencowe
Staff Writer

Defending several hundred murder suspects has gained attorney Jack Swerling much attention over the past 17 years. But the 45-year-old Bronx native and "rock 'n roll freak" ("I was the oldest person at the Van Halen concert,") keeps it all in perspective.

"Any recognition, I don't ever take it for granted," he says, including requests to speak, to write articles, or to play the part of Clarence Darrow in the Columbia Jewish Center's upcoming production of "Inherit the Wind." "I'm really excited about that," he says.

Long before any courtroom appearance, Swerling was winning high school drama and public speaking awards, perfect outlets for his insecurities. "I was a giant. Only two others in a school of 2,000 were as tall."

His Uncle Luther Adler appeared in gangster movies, an aunt was a stage actress and Cousin Peter Coyote, 49, went on to make it big in "E.T.," "Jagged Edge" and "Outrageous Fortune."

Swerling went another direction, however. "My drama teacher wanted me to do off-broadway work for the summer after my senior year. But I needed money to go to school, so I took another job."

With an economics degree from Clemson University, he returned North in 1968 to

work as an insurance adjuster discovering corporate American discrimination against his Hebrew faith.

Taking his fascination with the law and his wife, Erika, back South to USC law school. He went into practice first with mentor Isadore Lourie in 1973, then with friend Dick Harpoottlian.

The booming voice and 6-foot, 6-inch, 260-pound frame of the man labeled "Mr. Murder" and "Andre The Giant" could certainly intimidate any prosecutor.

But the descendant of Russian and Romanian immigrants and the survivor of tough Northern neighborhoods has seen too much prejudice. "I would defend those being picked on, and I think a lot of it has to do with my heritage."

Swerling's work with clients' mental disorders makes him a popular lecturer at the USC School of Medicine in the areas of neuropsychiatry and behavioral science.

Listed in at least three 1991-92 "Who's Who.." editions, he is also chairman of the criminal law division of the Richland County Bar and is on the board of editors of "Inside Drug Law."

The Swerlings, including aspiring lawyers, son Bryan and daughter Stephanie, enjoy getaway trips to Europe and New York because, he says, "I'm a big believer in a light at the end of the tunnel."