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## LEGAL MINDS ROAST, TOAST SWERLING

*CLIF LeBLANC, Staff Writer*

The political and legal elite pelted Columbia attorney **Jack Swerling** with salty tales and oneliners in a Tuesday night roast of one of the state's best-known defense lawyers. "What do you say about a guy that even Dick Harpootlian calls sleazy," said Gov. Jim Hodges, setting the tone for the evening.

Poking fun at the oversized **Swerling's** appetite for food and designer clothes, Hodges referred to him as, "the closest thing to Winona Ryder we have here."

The roast was a fund-raiser for the Columbia Jewish Day School, which serves about 80 students from 2-year-olds to seventh-graders.

Hodges, defeated last week for re-election, made fun of himself, too. "I did hear someone say, 'There's dead man walking.' "

Friend and fellow attorney Harry Goldberg called **Swerling**, "Columbia's version of Johnny Cochran and F. Lee Bailey rolled into one very large ball."

Many of the barbs from the panel of roasters were too spicy for publication.

But Columbia insurance agency owner Shep Cutler dredged up **Swerling's** infamous gallery of clients when Cutler strolled into a banquet hall in the Embassy Suites hotel dressed in prison stripes and impersonating mass murderer Pee Wee Gaskins.

**Swerling** defended Gaskins in a death-penalty trial that led to Gaskins' execution after his 12th murder conviction.

Columbia Mayor Bob Coble joked that Harpootlian used to embarrass the towering **Swerling** at airports, saying, "Hey kids, there goes Andre the Giant."

Coble said he has been the target of **Swerling's** harangues.

"I was 40 years old before I learned that shmuck is not a Yiddish term of endearment," the mayor said.

Former S.C. Bar president I.S. Leevy Johnson gigged the audience about the lack of "soul food" on the night's menu.

"Why have y'all been calling me Sammy Davis Jr. all night?" Johnson said of the late black entertainer who was Jewish.

Harpootlian and **Swerling** have been friends since 1967 when they were Clemson students and later were law partners for eight years.

Harpootlian complained that **Swerling** asked him not to be profane or joke about sex or gays. "That seriously hampers my repertoire," Harpootlian said.

But he told a story about how he had to persuade **Swerling** to talk to the media about cases. Now **Swerling** is among the most quoted lawyers in the state.

"I feel like I'm the guy who taught Madonna how to kiss," Harpootlian said.

S.C. Supreme Court Chief Justice Jean Toal lauded **Swerling** for the years he has given his time to teach lawyers, particularly young ones, how to become better attorneys.

Toal quoted poet Carl Sandburg. "Not often in the story of mankind does a man arrive on Earth who is both steel and velvet," Toal said, citing Sandburg's description of another lawyer, Abraham Lincoln.

## Jack Swerling



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