Despite 14 months in the international spotlight as Michael Jackson’s lead defense attorney, Tom Mesereau eschews the label “celebrity lawyer.” His true passion is defending the civil rights of poor minorities.

Born in West Point, N.Y., and raised in an affluent section of Englewood, N.J., Mesereau came from a military family. His father, a West Point graduate and a heavily decorated World War II parachute battalion commander, later became an assistant football coach at his alma mater. His uncle also graduated from West Point, and his grandfather was named an honorary graduate of their Class of 1915.

M-E-S-E-R-E-A-U spelled trouble at his Catholic grammar school. “I was involved in street fights and all kinds of mischief,” Mesereau admits. Later suspended three times from a small Jesuit school in New York City, he finally applied himself as a high school senior, but his late start necessitated a postgraduate year.

“I took to Andover the day I arrived,” Mesereau recalls. “My experience there was very rewarding—educationally, socially and in all ways. It broadened me tremendously in a short period of time.” Except for an occasional food fight, he was a model student.

Mesereau majored in government at Harvard and later earned a master’s degree in international relations at the London School of Economics. In 1979, he graduated from the University of California’s Hastings College of Law. He eventually became a prosecutor in the Orange County, Calif., district attorney’s office.

“I did not like being a prosecutor,” says Mesereau emphatically. “I am too compassionate. I was appalled by this glee prosecutors felt after winning the convictions of people who had lived very unfortunate lives.” He eventually joined a small Los Angeles law firm and began trying a variety of civil and criminal cases, finally realizing that he belonged in the courtroom and that his love was for criminal defense.

The glaring racial and economic imbalance of those in prison—and particularly those on death row—motivated Mesereau to volunteer at a free legal clinic in L.A. in the mid-’80s. His first civil case involved an uneducated 78-year-old black man who lived alone in a tiny house in a poor neighborhood. “He had been aggressively persuaded to recarpet his house and sign various financing documents,” explains Mesereau. “When he missed one payment, they began foreclosure on his house. I rose to his defense and we were successful.”

In 1999, Mesereau assisted at his own expense in the Alabama case of a homeless black man who was facing the death penalty, accused of the shocking murder of a white girl in a trendy part of Birmingham. “A highly credible witness had identified the perpe-

trator as a dark-skinned black man who had fired a gun with his left hand, but police were under intense pressure to make a quick arrest,” notes Mesereau. “Although light-skinned and right-handed, the homeless black man was easy prey.” Mesereau’s defense resulted in an acquittal.

“I have always thought long and hard about the death penalty, how it’s applied unfairly and unequally and how it does not deter crime,” says Mesereau. “In the last 15 years, over 130 people have been released from death- and life-sentences. These were cases where DNA could be tested. Think of all the cases where there is no DNA to test or it simply has not been tested, and you can begin to realize how many innocent people—mostly poor and minorities—have been convicted.”

When formal charges of conspiracy and child molestation were filed against entertainer Michael Jackson in December 2003, Jackson already knew of Mesereau and his extensive defense work on behalf of L.A.’s underprivileged. But it was Mesereau’s reputation as a brilliant trial lawyer that ultimately earned him a starring role in the most watched trial in history.

“It was a very high-pressure existence that intensified during the five-month trial—not just because of my client, whom I fervently believe is innocent—but because the whole world was watching,” says Mesereau. “People were constantly trying to get to Michael through me, to be part of the ‘event.’

“I treated it as a death penalty case because I didn’t think that, given his failing health, Michael Jackson could survive prison if convicted. The stakes were so high, but I was always very confident I could defend him properly and that the community in which he was tried would give him a fair shake. I liked the jury from the moment it was sworn in.” On June 13, 2005, that jury ultimately acquitted Jackson 14 times—10 times of charged felonies and four times of lesser misdemeanors.

Mesereau adds thoughtfully, “I’ve made a career out of defending people who are nameless and considered to be valueless. And I’m known to take cases where there is little or no money, cases that seem to have hopeless odds against acquittal. I’ve won a good number of them, and I value those cases very much. The Jackson case is no more important to me than any other.”

In July, Mesereau returned to the Deep South for his sixth year of providing pro bono legal assistance there. He recently formed a new Los Angeles law firm, Mesereau & Yu, LLP, and is working on a book about his views of the criminal justice system, based on his experiences from the Jackson trial. Barbara Walters recently named Mesereau “one of the 10 most fascinating people for 2005.” Watch for her interview with Mesereau on an ABC news special in December.

—Jill Clerkin