

Ridge's hip-hop lawyer



Lawyer Stephen Murphy in front of the Brooklyn Supreme Courthouse.

**After defending Hurst
bias murder suspects,
Stephen Murphy works
at keeping rappers free**

By Jonathan Soderstrom
The Brooklyn Paper

The venerable and nitrolic criminal lawyer Stephen Murphy spoke to his friend, rap star 50 Cent, from his May Ridge law office recently.

The conversation, said Murphy, was brief but amiable, with the multi-platinum rapper extending an invitation to a party he was throwing in August for a mutual friend. The only question was whether Murphy would fit in.

See HIPHOP on page 16

HIP-HOP..

Continued from page 1

"The last party I went to they all thought I was a record producer," said Murphy, who heads a private practice in Bay Ridge and lives in Marine Park. "I asked them, 'Why do you think I'm a record producer?' and all they could say was 'Um, well'."

By Murphy's own count, this will be the fourth party he

will have attended in which the guest of honor is a satisfied client with ties to the rap music industry. At each, the 61-year-old New Yorker of Irish descent finds himself mingling among mostly black men and women half his age, many buying lucrative record contracts.

"Basically, I was well known before these cases," Murphy said of a quartet of murder trials in which his

clients have been celebrated rappers. "But in Riker's Island, they all talk to each other and if one guy starts talking about you, you know, 'I got this guy as a lawyer,' they all eventually hear about it."

It is a remarkable turn of events for Murphy, nearly two decades after a pair of high-profile and racially inflammatory cases catapulted him to fame while tarnishing his image within the black community.

Murphy's name first reached the daily newspapers

in 1986, after he was retained by the family of Michael Perone, one of a dozen young white men in Howard Beach, Queens, charged in the death of a 23-year-old black man. The victim, Michael Griffith, died after the mob chased him and two friends onto the Belt Parkway, where he was struck by a car. Perone, charged with manslaughter, was the only one of the alleged attackers to be acquitted.

If that decision wasn't convincing enough, a case three years later certainly helped etch a picture of Murphy as an animated and devoted defense attorney with a reputation for defending white men faced with race crimes.

This time he took on Keith Mondello, one of seven young white men in Bensonhurst charged with the racially fueled murder of Yusuf Hawkins, a black man, in 1989. Although prosecutors fingered Mondello as the ringleader, Murphy got him off.

He says that while he was representing Mondello, he was punched and locked after a mob of more than 25 men chased him down Montague Street.

Still, Murphy, who proudly notes that in nearly three decades he has never lost a murder case, contends that a majority of his clients throughout his career have been black. These days, he said, a handful of clients have taken to calling him "my o—" — a term of endearment to some.

Last year, a now defunct hip-hop magazine titled Felon published a highly favorable article about Murphy.

"I don't know if it's theater with them, a way they have to act on stage, but in person they're all very nice guys," Murphy said of his rap-world clients. "They're no pussy cats, don't get me wrong, but they're easy to get along with."

The party in August, he said, is in honor of Barja Walter, a client who was acquitted last year on charges that he fired shots at five police officers near the Lewis Armstrong public housing project in Reelfoot-Stuyvesant. 50 Cent paid Murphy's full fee on behalf of Walter, a childhood friend of the rapper growing up in Queens. During the course of the trial, however, Murphy and 50 Cent, who is perhaps most famous for having been shot three times, became fast friends.

"He isn't any different than anyone else," said Murphy. "Like a lot of his friends, he had a hard life. Things can be tough, but he's not a bad kid."

The evidence against Walter was whittled away over time, until it was determined that much of the testimony by police officers had been based on false statements. The charge was reduced to firing at two cops before the case was decided in his client's favor by a jury that deliberated for less than an hour.

Nonetheless, Walter had violated his parole on an earlier sentence and was sent to Riker's Island, from where he was to be released on July 26.

Besides Walter, Murphy has successfully represented Elanthen Johnson and is awaiting a decision on a pending case for Lloyd Banks, both rappers with critically acclaimed albums. The latter is connected to Nas, thought to be one of his generation's most talented rappers.

Asked again how he would fit in at the 50 Cent party for his client, Murphy paused before saying that he would have no difficulty doing so.

"These are basically decent guys," he said. "They've got talent, now they've gotten a couple of breaks, and they're making the most of it."

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