

# Murphy's the New Comeback Kid

Q Life

**Q** UEENS SUPREME COURT Justice Thomas Demakos calls Stephen Girard Murphy one of the "best trial lawyers I've ever seen."

That's a sentiment shared by Brooklyn District Attorney Charles Hynes, who prosecuted the racially charged Howard Beach case in the late 1980s, and then devoted a chapter in his subsequent book, "Incident at Howard Beach," to the cocky lawyer, titling it simply

"Murphy's Game."

Murphy was at the top of his game in that trial — his client, Michael Pirone, was the only one of several charged in the murder of Michael Griffith to walk. In 1990, Murphy client Keith Mondello was acquitted of murder and a manslaughter charge in the Bensonhurst killing of Yusef Hawkins, although he was convicted on lesser charges.

The bantam lawyer, who lives in Brooklyn, seemed on his way to fame and fortune, and he was linked to other great trial lawyers of New York — people like Barry Slotnick, who defended Bernard Goetz; Jack Litman, who defended Robert Chambers in the "preppie" murder of young Jennifer Levin in Central Park; and Bruce Cutler, the Speedo-wearing lawyer who kept John Gotti out of jail almost to the end.

"You won't fall asleep on Murphy's on his feet in a courtroom," says Irene Cornell, who has been covering the city's sensational trials since 1970 for WCBS radio.

"I love guys like Murphy," says Cornell, now covering the Sean (Puffy) Combs trial in Manhattan, starring Johnnie Cochran in what Cochran says will be his last criminal trial.

Like Murphy, she says, Cochran draws attention to himself. "When the jury first saw him in the courtroom, they gasped. We thought it was because they recognized Combs [on trial for alleged illegal possession of a gun and attempted bribery], but it was Cochran they saw."

In May, 1990, while covering the Bensonhurst trial, I made a date to have lunch with Murphy at a restaurant near the Brooklyn State Supreme Courthouse. That's when I found out just how radioactive Murphy was to people who didn't like his clients and accused him of being a racist.

A crowd followed the then-46-year-old lawyer, who grew up in Woodside and whose father was a deputy fire commissioner, taunting and yelling at him until one of them came up from behind and struck him.

In my column the next day I wrote that it was "a sneak punch," developed out of "crowd courage." Murphy threw down his briefcase and challenged the crowd to a fight. No one took up the challenge.

In the bar where we had lunch, Murphy shrugged off the encounter. "He hits like a little girl," he said, digging into a meal of crab cakes washed down with a vodka cocktail.

When a police captain came to the table where we sat, and asked Murphy if he wanted to sign a complaint for assault, Murphy said he didn't.

"I'll settle this wherever he wants to settle it," he said.

He looked out the window where the crowd was yelling and said, "They're doing just what those kids in Bensonhurst are accused of doing," even though he was defending one of those kids, Mondello.

A few days ago we made a date for another lunch in a much quieter setting, a small French restaurant in Midtown Manhattan.

Murphy wanted to get the word out that he's now back practicing law in Brooklyn after a rough patch during which his license was suspended for a year by the Appellate Division of the State Supreme Court for professional misconduct, his marriage to a woman who bore him four children had ended, and he was hospitalized with multiple injuries when a car struck him on 92nd Street in Brooklyn in 1999.

Murphy is still a force of nature. His colleagues along Queens Boulevard, where he had worked as an assistant district attorney — his boss was Thomas Demakos, who presided over the Howard Beach murder trial years later — called him the Crazy Eddie of



Dennis Duggan

the New York bar for his in-your-face courtroom tactics. Murphy, now 57 and recently remarried, says he is still his old self.

He shows me the broken knuckles on his right hand and declares, "I am aggressive, that's who I am."

His role model is former linebacker Lawrence Taylor, the "greatest football player who ever lived," adding that "I come to court to fight the way LT came to play football."

He spins out story after story, hunched over the table like a folded jackknife, his voice rising to a crescendo as he talks about lawyers ("mostly liars"), cops who lie in courts as "B.S. artists" and judges he considers to be too dumb to be on the bench.

He has another hero and it's Bruce Springsteen. "I saw him at a concert where 19,000 people hung on his every word," he says.

It is the effect Murphy wants to create in every trial in which he's involved. Hynes, who prosecuted the case against four men accused of killing Griffith, wrote in his book, done in collaboration with former Newsday reporter Robert Drury, that "Murphy was so good there were times I was envious of him." And when Hynes' wife, Pat, was hurt in an auto accident, Murphy sent two dozen roses to the hospital.

"We're good friends," he says of Hynes, but admits that in a letter he sent along with the roses he wrote, "Hurry up and get better so you can watch me kick your husband's —."

His main tactic in court, says Murphy, one of whose sons now works as an ADA in Hynes' office, is "to get people [witnesses] into my rhythm."

"That way they don't have a chance to think of an alibi on the stand," he says, his voice rising to a point that one writer likened to the squeaks coming from the mouth of Curly of Three Stooges fame.

He has been thrown out of courtrooms by exasperated judges, and is often badmouthed by fellow lawyers, but he has an enviable record of winning cases, both as a prosecutor and as a defense lawyer, which he has been for almost three decades.

"Some of them thank me and I tell them that I did this for myself, not for you. I also tell some of them that 'I don't care what you did, God will take care of it, but I will try as hard for you whether you did it or not,'" he says.

"I know I'd be more popular if I were a nice guy," he says, "but it's what makes me a good lawyer. I tell prospective jurors that I'm not a nice guy."

He sometimes tells people who he thinks are being cute, "Listen, I didn't come here on the last bus from Omaha." ●