

OAKLAND

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STAR DEFENDER

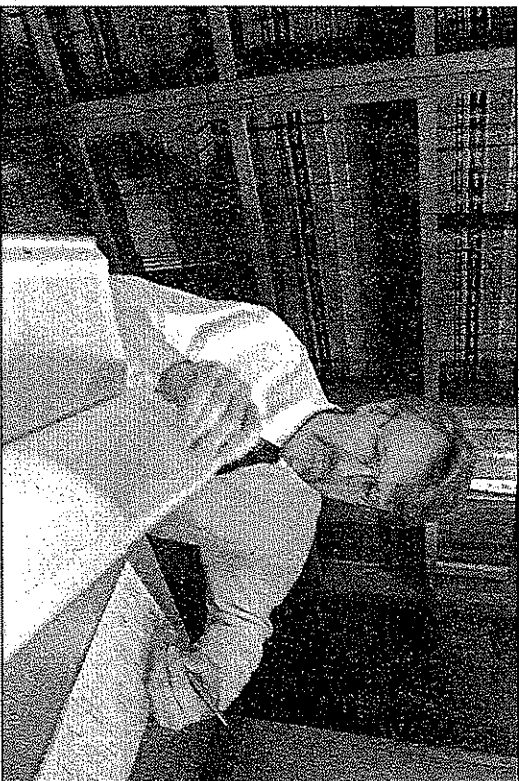
Lawyer at Bloomfield Hills firm uses talents to get celebrities out of trouble

By L.I. BRASIER
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

When a famous bad-boy rap star is charged with pistol-whipping some guy who's been kissing on his woman, or when an internationally known shock rocker allegedly assaults a hapless guard during a concert — and when Cell Block #9 could be an address instead of a golden oldie — who do they call for legal help?

Wally P, the polka player.

Former federal prosecutor Walter Piszczatowski and his colleagues at the tony Bloomfield Hills law firm of Hertz, Schram & Saretsky have built a star-studded client base in recent years, representing some of metro Detroit's famous — some would say infamous — characters. The firm, nestled on the shore of Square Lake, has become a kind of one-stop law shop for the Beautiful People, where celebrity authors



Piszczatowski works 60 or 70 hours a week — even more when he is involved in a trial, colleagues say.

have their wills drawn up and multimillionaire auto executives get help with their divorces.

Piszczatowski, 50, specializes in criminal defense work for the

firm. His most recent celebrity clients were Eminem and Marilyn Manson, both of whom faced assault charges.

Not a bad gig for a skinny

Polish kid from the west side of Detroit, the son of a factory worker and secretary who put himself through law school playing clarinet and flute in a polka band.

"Hey, who knew?" he said during a recent interview at a Bloomfield Hills restaurant. He was wolfing down fish and considering desert, checking his voice mail on a cell phone and rifling through his briefcase, looking for his court calendar.

His mind is quick. And he talks quickly.

"I think it's a matter of staying focused," he said, in explaining his success, "of taking pride in doing a good job, not missing anything, which puts you over the top."

That, and an overdeveloped work ethic. His fellow lawyers say he works 60 or 70 hours a week, even more when he is involved in

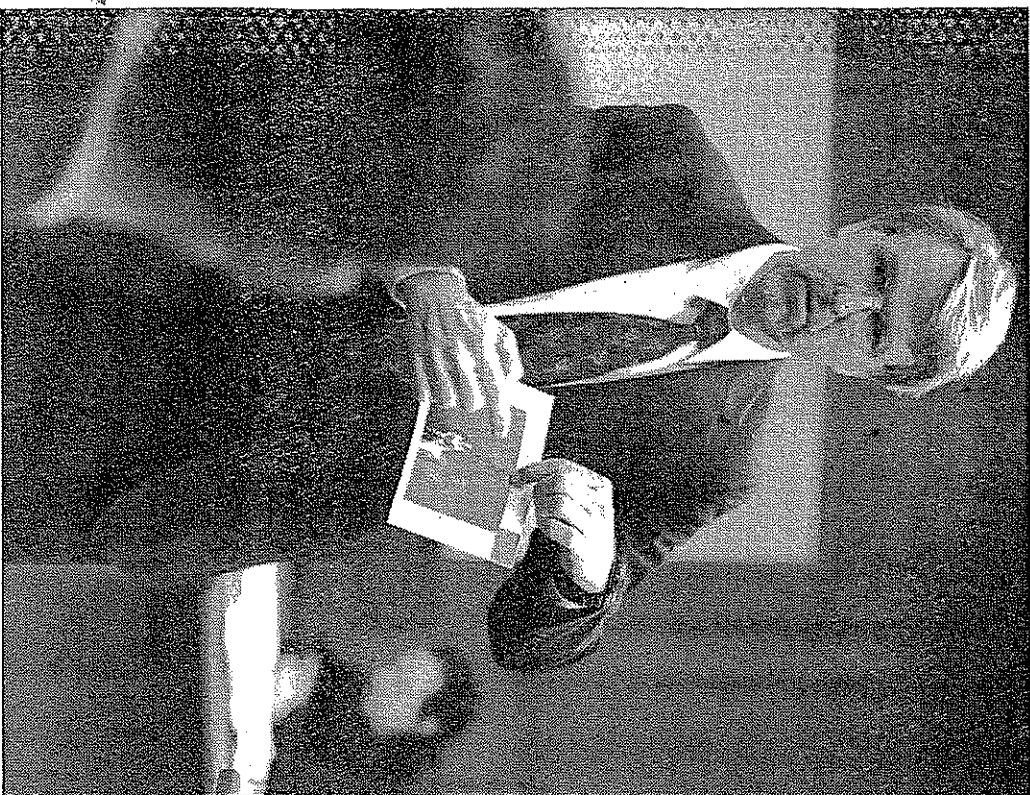
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Walter Piszczatowski, right, and Howard Hertz stand near celebrities' pictures on a wall of Hertz's office at Hertz, Schram & Saretsky in Bloomfield Hills. Piszczatowski, a former federal prosecutor, has defended Marilyn Manson and Eminem.

Photos by RICHARD LEE/Detroit Free Press

WALLY | Lawyer defends the famous, infamous



CHIP SOMODEVIL/A/Detroit Free Press

Attorney Walter Piszczatowski argues in defense of shock rocker Marilyn Manson at a preliminary hearing last month.

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a trial.

Colleague James Burdick, also known for his intensity, shakes his head: "If he's got a type A personality, that would make me a B."

Piszczatowski didn't start out to become the defender of stars. A straight-A student in Catholic schools — where he says he acquired his ability to swear — he graduated from Wayne State University law school and promptly joined the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office. In the courtroom, he shined.

"The thing about Wally is that he is very comfortable with who he is," said Timothy Kenny, chief judge of the Wayne County Circuit Court criminal division. Kenny and Piszczatowski were prosecutors at the same time.

"I think juries are comfortable with him. And his enthusiasm — he's like a small kid on Christmas morning."

Piszczatowski took that enthusiasm and parlayed it into a job with the United States Attorney's Office, an appointment he insists he got because the office needed a leftfielder for its softball team.

He then joined Hertz, Schram & Saretzky in 1988.

It was a perfect fit, according to Howard Hertz, a founding partner of the firm that employs 30 attorneys. Hertz heads the firm's

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TIMOTHY KENNY, chief judge of the Wayne County Circuit Court criminal division

entertainment division, and does the civil work for his famous clients. He has helped Marshall Mathers, also known as Eminem, negotiate record deals and is noted author Elmore Leonard's personal attorney. He handles contracts for Atlantic Records and has represented singer George Clinton.

So when one of his stars runs afoul of the law, Hertz calls upstairs to Wally P.

"He's the guy I turn to when a client has this kind of problem," Hertz said. "Because I know the kind of job he'll do."

Hertz, a former public defender in Wayne County, often encountered prosecutor Piszczatowski at the Frank Murphy Hall of Justice in Detroit. The two sometimes found themselves on opposite sides of a case but never faced each other at trial.

In handling Manson's case late last month, Piszczatowski convinced a judge that writhing against a guard's head was show

biz and not sexual assault. The charge was reduced to disorderly conduct, and Manson is expected to plead guilty to the misdemeanor and pay a fine.

Piszczatowski kept Eminem out of jail last year by negotiating pleas in two courts. Eminem could have faced up to 5 years in prison on felonious assault, but instead pleaded guilty to a reduced charge of carrying a concealed weapon and was placed on probation.

Piszczatowski has acquired the trappings of success — a large home in West Bloomfield, a Mercedes, a Porsche, ski trips to Vail, Colo. But it hasn't changed him much. He drove his first Mercedes, a 1983 model, for 13 years, putting 225,000 miles on it.

For a while, he chauffeured Eminem to court dates in the Piszczatowski family minivan.

He spends his spare time with his family and helps his two girls with their homework each night. He calls his father every other day.

"I'm making more money than I ever thought I would," he said. "But you know, my old man is the guy he always was, and I was taught to respect your roots and not be ashamed of them. Because that's where you come from; that's who you are."

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