

**Is Brad Grey
Over His Head
At Paramount?**

BY KIM MASTERS

**The Busiest
Cemetery
In the World**

BY DAVE FERRELL

**T Bone Burnett
Comes Out of
The Shadows**

BY JOE RHODES

**Nobody Does
Spin Control
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BY STEVE ONEY

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FEATURES

62 THE GREAT OUTDOORS For nature lovers, Southern California is paradise. We've got beaches and mountains, deserts and canyons, trails to hike and rivers to pan for gold. Here's what to do when the call of the wild calls you *by Scott Doggett*

72 CALL MIKE SITRICK As head of the public relations firm Sitrick and Company, Mike Sitrick is the guy people hire to clean up their images when they've been accused of hit-and-run (Halle Berry), selling tainted meat (Food Lion), or sanctioning illegal wiretaps (Terry Christensen). How Los Angeles's king of lost causes salvages careers, takes on the media, and influences what we see and read *by Steve Oney*

78 LIFE (& DEATH) Rose Hills is the largest—and busiest—cemetery in the United States. Since it opened in Whittier more than 90 years ago, it has also been one of the most inclusive. The

grounds are lovely, but the job is tough: marketing bereavement without offending, chasing down death certificates, getting the hair and makeup just right, all while meeting the cultural needs of L.A.'s diverse population *by Dave Ferrell*

86 THE INSIDER COMES OUT TO PLAY In the 1970s, T Bone Burnett had the makings of a star. Instead, the singer-songwriter spent the following decades making stars of others, producing groundbreaking albums for everyone from Los Lobos to Gillian Welch and creating soundtracks for *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *Cold Mountain*. This month Burnett emerges from behind the curtain to release two albums and embark on his first major tour in more than 20 years *by Joe Rhodes*

92 L.A. HOME: FURNISH FETISH Eleven local designers make furniture that doubles as art *by Emily Young*

LA MAGAZINE

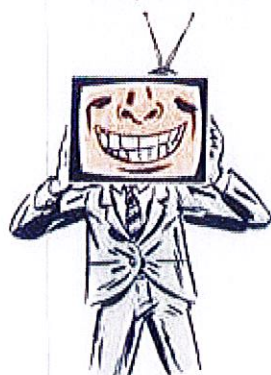


WAVE RUNNERS: On the beach in Southern California, part of our Outdoors guide (page 62)

EDITOR'S NOTE

THE PLAYER

POWER IN LOS ANGELES USUALLY EXPRESSES ITSELF loudly—the booth at the Grill, the courtside seat at the Staples Center, the boldfaced name in the trades—so it's striking when power expresses itself surreptitiously. Mike Sitrick, founder of the crisis management public relations firm Sitrick and Company and the subject of this month's profile by senior writer Steve Oney, is not above being gaudy—he has a weakness for the \$60,000 watch and the vintage Mercedes—but he may be the most powerful man in Los Angeles you've never heard of. For the past 15 years he has been advising the



wealthy, the influential, and the infamous (the same person in many cases) on how to handle the media. Although the bulk of his firm's business is mundane, shepherding companies through bankruptcy and other financial transactions, Sitrick is best known for representing those who are in hot water. In fact, were you to rattle off a random list of L.A.'s most troubled institutions of the last couple of years—the Catholic archdiocese, the Getty, the Dodgers, the Kabbalah Center—you'd also be identifying some of Sitrick's most prominent local clients. As one journalist explained to Steve, as soon as he hears Sitrick is representing someone, he knows it's likely to be a juicy story.

Sitrick is a distinctly modern figure. Sure, there have been publicists for as long as there's been a press. But as Steve points out, Sitrick is a pure product of the 24-hour news cycle, of a culture dominated and defined by newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, the Internet, of the never-ending noise streaming into our lives. Beyond his aggressiveness, beyond his toughness, what distinguishes Sitrick is his ability to play the media to his clients' advantage. The media, he implies, is just a system, and like any system, it can be manipulated. He understands that it's insatiable, that because reporters must continually feed the beast it's much better for his clients to get their story out than to say "No comment." Conversely, he understands that if he can identify the media as the culprit, many will sympathize. Modern media is, after all, a big business—no different from oil or insurance—and can behave as cravenly as any other big business.

Sitrick's approach is almost the exact opposite of that of the movie industry, which has always regarded the press with suspicion, a group to be kept at bay. Critics, the *Industry handbook* goes, are to be marginalized; if they can't be, corrupt them with junkets and freebies. Feature writers are best seen as an extension of the marketing department, and business reporters should be used to advance an agenda. Sitrick's view may be just as cynical, but it's proved far more effective. The term "effective," of course, is relative. There's only so much you can do to preserve the reputation of a Michael Ovitz or a Rush Limbaugh. The question, then, is why after all these years of anonymity did Sitrick agree to be the subject of his first major profile? Maybe he's taking his own advice and opening himself to the press. Or maybe he's playing us.

Kit Rachlis
Editor-in-Chief

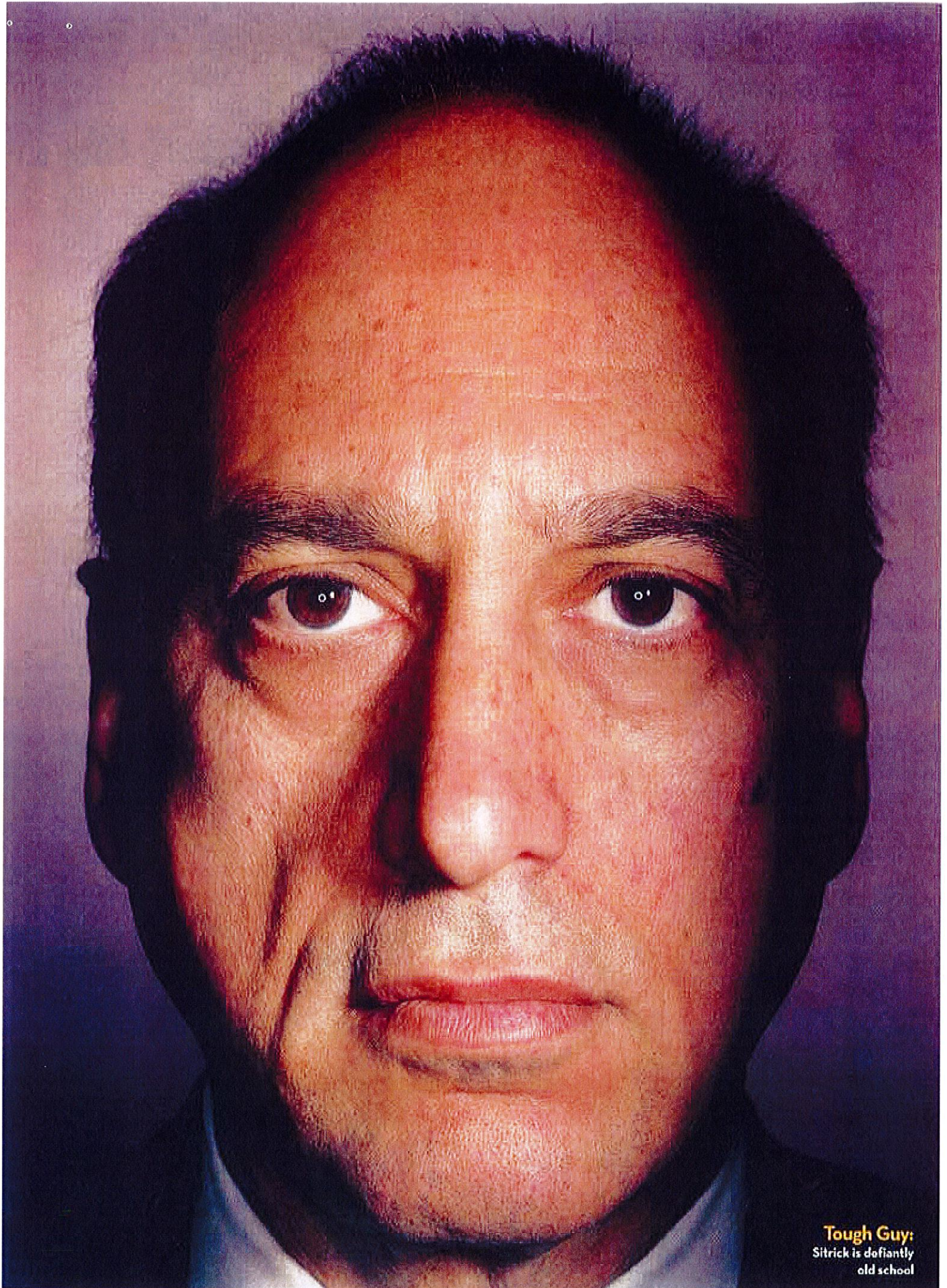
Fled the scene of an accident? At war with Page Six? Taking on the most powerful man in Hollywood? Addicted to painkillers? Accused of molesting children?

Call Mike Sitrick.

That's what Halle Berry, Ron Burkle, Roy Disney, Rush Limbaugh, and the Catholic archdiocese did. He plays the media better than anybody.

By Steve Oney

Photograph by Dan Winters



Tough Guy:
Sitrick is defiantly
old school

Mike Sitrick's corner office high in Century City's

Northrop Building could pass for that of a San Fernando Valley accountant. The sofas are maroon, the tables green marble, and the desk and cabinetry blond wood. A LeRoy Neiman lithograph of a bar scene dominates a wall. There's nothing about the room that suggests its occupant is one of the most powerful figures in American media. But over the past 15 years the crisis management public relations firm of Sitrick and Company has shaped some of the nation's most important news stories. On this spring morning Sitrick is orchestrating the story that's on the lips of everyone from Los Angeles to New York. "If you do that," he is telling Ron Burkle, the billionaire former owner of the Ralphs supermarket chain, founder of the Yucaipa Companies, and business partner and friend of Bill Clinton, "it's going to appear in *New York* magazine that you said, 'No comment.' That isn't what you want."

Five days earlier the *New York Daily News*, beneath the headline "The Billionaire, the Post and the \$220G Shakedown," broke the story that *New York Post* gossip writer Jared Paul Stern had allegedly attempted to extort money from Burkle in return for favorable coverage in the influential Page Six column. The *Daily News* article was the culmination of a plan that Sitrick and Burkle put into motion after viewing surveillance tapes made in Burkle's New York loft in late March that had captured the *Post* writer informing the billionaire that "\$100,000 to get going and month to month \$10,000" would keep unflattering items out of print. Confronted by what he regarded as Stern's "reprehensible behavior," Sitrick counseled that they submit the writer to "the Wheel of Pain," his term for the public relations equivalent of torture. "This guy deserves to be outed," says Sitrick. With a federal investigation under way and consecutive front-page stories in *The New York Times* portraying Stern as conniving and clumsy, the campaign took off, reaching its peak with a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed column that appeared under Burkle's byline but was ghosted by Sitrick in which the billionaire cast himself as a crusader for journalistic ethics.

Now, however, the story—as stories often do—is threatening to shift. Geoffrey Gray, a reporter for *New York*, had phoned Sitrick to ask whether the surveillance videos had been edited to depict Stern in a bad light and whether a private detective by the name of Rich DiSabatino had been in-

involved in the tapings. With the weekly magazine's deadline approaching, Sitrick had initiated a conference call with Burkle, his lawyer, and a Yucaipa executive to discuss how to respond.

"He's fishing for a new angle," Sitrick informs the group. "The only reason he would do this is that Stern is trying to put false goods out there. We can't say, 'No comment.' We have to tell them that the tapes were not edited and that DiSabatino was not involved in this matter. If we do that, I think that will be the end of it."

Burkle and the others take just a minute to agree on a decision. Sitrick then phones the *New York* writer, for whom he leaves a succinct voice-mail message: "Geoff, the information you're getting is false."

Dressed in a custom-made dark suit, a monogrammed royal blue shirt, and a lavender-and-silver-print tie, Sitrick comes across as a high-priced defense lawyer. Exactly so—there's something of the gut fighter about him. His voice is raspy, and although he curses infrequently, he speaks in clipped, crude sentences. Short and balding, with slicked-back graying hair and circles under his eyes, he bears a disconcerting resemblance to Roy Cohn. He takes it as a compliment that Wendy McCaw, the owner of the *Santa Barbara News-Press* and a former client, refers to him as "the meanest son of a bitch I've ever worked with." The combination of elegance and pugnaciousness has attracted a vast assortment of clients, ranging from the embattled (the Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles) to the weird (the Kabbalah Center) to

the troubled (conservative talk-radio-show host Rush Limbaugh, actress Halle Berry, singer R. Kelly) to the arrogant (the Getty Center) to the overexposed (rock and roller Tommy Lee) to the shady (Carl Freer, the gun-wielding Swedish national whose business partner, Bo Stefan Eriksson, was jailed in April after totaling a \$1 million Ferrari Enzo in Malibu) to others so secretive, rich, or despicable that the only way to help them is never to acknowledge publicly that the firm is involved. He charges \$695 an hour.

"It's been a blur," Sitrick says as he falls into a chair beneath a painting by Peter Max, a former client and another defiantly unfashionable artist. It wasn't until after a seder dinner at his home the night before that he'd learned that *New York* was pursuing its story. Which meant that he'd been up late speaking to the reporter by phone and back in touch with him at six-thirty this morning via his BlackBerry. But he isn't complaining. "I love this," he says. "It charges me up. I feel like I'm getting justice for the people I represent. I like the battle, the challenge, the intellectual stimulation, and when it works right, I like winning."

As it turns out, all of the effort pays off. When the April 24 issue of *New York* hits the stands the following week, Geoffrey Gray's item in the *Intelligencer* section contains no mention of edited tapes or private eyes. Instead, it focuses on the coincidence that Burkle and Rupert Murdoch, chairman of News Corp., which publishes the *New York Post*, live within a few houses of each other on the same Beverly Hills street.

Client States

Mike Sitrick fights their fights



Ron Burkle

Engineered the former grocery magnate's campaign against Page Six



Halle Berry

Performed damage control following the actress's hit-and-run accident



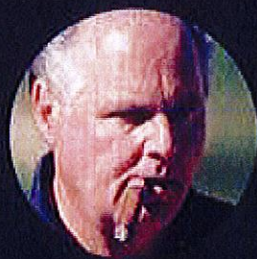
Roy Disney

Orchestrated the Disney scion's boardroom battle with Michael Eisner



Michael Ovitz

Helped ex-CAA chief during Anthony Pellicano investigation



Rush Limbaugh

Handled the press after the polemicist was charged with abusing OxyContin



Terry Christensen

Dealt with the media when the lawyer was indicted in the Anthony Pellicano case



Marvin Davis

Represented the outsize mogul for the last ten years of his life



Kim Basinger

Shepherded the actress through her 1993 bankruptcy



Cardinal Mahony

Advised the L.A. Catholic archdiocese on its continuing sex abuse scandal

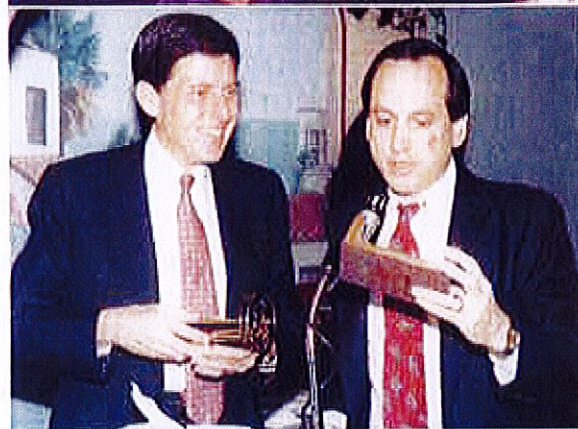
EVERY MORNING MIKE SITRICK WALKS into the dressing room of his Pacific Palisades home and gazes at the contents of three felt-lined glass-door boxes, each about the size of a car battery. Called watch winders, the boxes contain oscillating cylinders around which the publicist's 15 gleaming wristwatches are attached like rings to fingers. The purpose is to simulate body motion, assuring that the timepieces remain accurate to the second, even when not worn for months. Sitrick always starts his day by deciding which watch to wear. Should it be the rose gold Franck Muller "Master Banker," a rectangular jewel that tells the time in three zones? The round yellow gold Breguet? The steel Girard-Perregaux? Or the Rolex? Of late he has usually selected the Patek Philippe "Perpetual Calendar." Its slender casing feels smooth against the skin, and its white face with black Roman numerals and hands is easy to read. At three o'clock the piece indicates the day of the week, at six the date, at nine the month, and it knows the cycles of the moon and the arrival of leap year. It is worth \$61,000.

Sitrick's love of wristwatches speaks to the world he lives in and has mastered: the 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week theater-in-the-round that is modern media. It is a world where executives resist hostile takeovers, wealthy defendants prepare for trial, institutions gird against scandal, companies file for bankruptcy, entertainers fend off charges of drug abuse or child pornography, and businessmen plot against rivals—and where public image is paramount. It can determine a jury's verdict or a board's decision or a

movie's success. For the men and women who use him as their consultant, Sitrick is valued both for his ability to influence what appears in print and on television and as a sign of power itself. Like the Patek Philippe, he is at once a precision instrument and an outrageous indulgence.

Sitrick is far removed from the stereotypic, glad-handing press agents who in the teens worked Broadway and invented the profession. Nor does he bear much resemblance to Edward Bernays, who popularized the term "public relations" and led the field into its research-driven 20th-century incarnation. A nephew of Sigmund Freud, Bernays pioneered the notion that publicity could change buying habits and political preferences. His 1929 Easter parade of stylish women puffing what he called "torches of freedom" on New York's Fifth Avenue linked cigarettes with liberation, thereby selling Lucky Strikes. At other times he was indirect, as when he lobbied Congress during the 1950s to fund the Interstate Highway System—not so much for the good of the people but for his client, Mack Trucks, which was battling the railroads for control of the nation's freight business. In a classic essay Bernays asserted that his goal was to "engineer consent." Sitrick belongs to a different age. The homogeneity and innocence necessary for Bernays's brand of ballyhoo has vanished. The 21st century is a time of metastasizing communications, conflict-driven news, and skepticism. Contentiousness now reigns, and engineering dissent—or defusing it—is what's required. In a marketplace where there is invariably an opposing narrative or the roar of just plain noise, those who hope to control their images must employ hired guns to sell themselves and their stories.

Action attracts Sitrick, and in his business action is all there is. "The other guys who run big PR firms in Los Angeles are in it for status," says Carol Stogsdill, a former senior editor at the *Los Angeles Times* who worked briefly for Sitrick and is now executive director of media relations at UCLA. "They need to be at the table. Mike could not only not care less about being at the table, he doesn't want to be at the table. It doesn't move fast enough for



Partners:
Sitrick (top) with Nancy, his wife of 37 years, and (above) with mentor and former Wickes CEO Sanford Sigloff

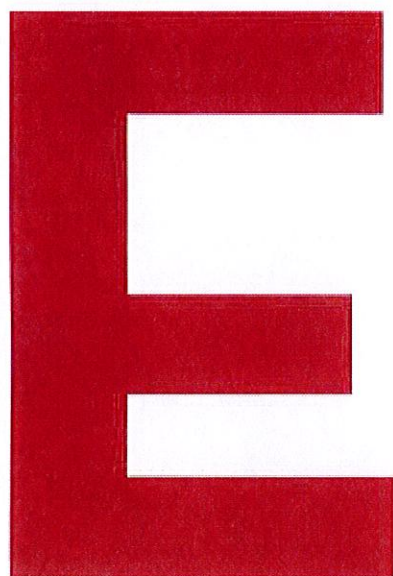
him." Indeed, Sitrick, who often travels to New York on business, stopped flying American Airlines when the carrier discontinued in-flight phone service. He's also one of the few people who continue to rely on an answering service, believing it's imperative that clients and reporters can talk to him at any hour. In a profession built on crisis, Sitrick is never happier than when juggling two or three. He is so obsessed with his job that friends say he finds it hard to pause long enough to enjoy a good meal. By his own admission he has few outside interests and rarely socializes unless his wife, Nancy, insists. The two were college sweethearts and have been married for 37 years. "The stability of my personal life has allowed me to do this job," he says. "I fight on enough fronts at work. I don't want to have to worry about fighting at home."

Sitrick's effectiveness is inextricably linked to his tough-mindedness, to a desire not only to engage in battle but to annihilate opponents. He's as unapologetically old school as the paintings on his office walls. "He's the Godfather," says his friend Dennis Holt, founder of Western International Media, the television advertising buying firm.

"He's extremely loyal, extremely passionate, and extremely vindictive. If someone takes advantage of his friends or clients, he'll go out of his way to even the score." Adds Seth Lubove, the Los Angeles bureau chief of Bloomberg News Service, "Mike thinks of himself as a brawler. He's the Jew with a chip on his shoulder. Whenever he goes up against a news organization, he sees himself taking on the goyim. He's vicious, and he's proud of it. He's not literally a leg breaker, but metaphorically, sure."

The word used to describe Sitrick by members of the press—his most important constituency—is *relentless*. Says Ron Grover, the Los Angeles bureau chief of *BusinessWeek*, "There are flacks, and then there are people who really work a story. Mike really works a story. I've e-mailed him from home on Saturdays when I'm trying to get through some dense financial document, and he's always e-mailed right back." Sitrick can also make life hard for journalists. "Mike's M.O. is to badger reporters," says Lubove. "He demands to know who your sources are. He demands that you hear his client's side of things. I'll just hammers you."

Far from being merely an inexhaustible scrapper, though, Sitrick possesses a nuanced awareness of how the media work. He knows the little things, such as when to call a reporter on deadline and when not to. He understands the subtle things, among them that a relationship with an assignment editor will pay greater dividends than one with a network executive. He also recognizes an undeniable truth: The press always has the last word. All of this enables him to function equally well on offense or defense. He's best known for helping clients in duress, but much of his business involves corporations and investors conducting complicated financial transactions. "Mike has an uncanny ability to assess a situation," says investment banker Alex Yermenidjian. Over the years Sitrick has worked with the former MGM chairman on a number of deals. "You call him up and no matter how bleak or dire your story, within a minute of hearing it he's evaluated it and is articulating a strategy; and within five minutes he's on the phone executing."



EVEN AS SITRICK WAS CONDUCTING

his initial conversations with Burkle about the Page Six matter, he was launching a campaign for Biovail, a Canadian pharmaceutical manufacturer he's long represented. In February the company, which distributes the antidepressant Wellbutrin, had filed a racketeering lawsuit alleging that SAC Capital Advisors, a major Wall Street hedge fund, and Arizona-based Gradient Analytics had colluded to generate false research reports intended to drive down its stock price. That way SAC, which was betting that the value of Biovail's shares would drop, could reap enormous profits by short selling. In the financial world this was a major story, but because of its complexity it was hard to convey to a wider audience. Nonetheless, Sitrick pitched the piece not just to *The*

Wall Street Journal and *The New York Times* but also to *60 Minutes*. "Mike is extraordinary," says Victoria Gordon, the news-magazine's executive story editor. "He does a very difficult kind of public relations, and I respect him." Moreover, Gordon, like countless other news executives, covets the journalistic access the publicist can broker. "I'm working with him on several stories," she says, one of them being a possible first television interview with Rush Limbaugh, who—should he be willing to talk about his

addiction to the painkiller OxyContin—would be, in the parlance of the business, a "great get." To sell an editor this client while tantalizing her with that is a basic PR move that Sitrick long ago perfected. Following extensive discussions with the publicist, *60 Minutes* assigned the Biovail piece to correspondent Lesley Stahl. On March 26, the company was rewarded with a double-barreled coup—a massive article on the front page of that morning's *New York Times* business section followed by a 13-minute segment on that evening's edition of *60 Minutes*. Biovail took its lumps in both pieces. An executive at the research firm accused of fabricating data termed the lawsuit "a fiction novel." SAC's lawyer dismissed the whole thing as "false and implausible." Others discussed the pharmaceutical company's generally anemic earnings performance. Still, Sitrick had given his client a leg up. He had struck first, and he had struck hard. "People were talking about it for weeks," he says. "Nobody could believe *60 Minutes* would devote so much time to a financial story."

More often, the best Sitrick can do is diminish the damage. "So many of Mike's clients are lost causes," says Lubove. How, after all, can one really burnish the image of an institution (the archdiocese) whose priests

ceedings of his client Kirk Kerkorian was dismay. "Nobody believed Terry had done anything wrong," says Sitrick. "They were hurt and perplexed. Internally that was all okay, but my job was to get them ready to answer the question every reporter would ask because it was the question I would ask: 'Why did he hire Pellicano?'" To that end, Sitrick pounded out a statement emphasizing that Christensen had engaged the detective only after "the police, the District Attorney, and the Los Angeles County Child Protective Services" rebuffed his requests that they investigate death threats against Kerkorian and his daughter. Furthermore, the statement declared, the lawyer never asked Pellicano to bug anyone. "Mike helped us articulate what we didn't know how to say," says Christensen's partner Patricia Glaser. That was just for starters. On the morning the indictment was handed down, Sitrick had Glaser on the phone to the *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, and the law firm distributed yet another statement, this one from the reclusive Kerkorian, proclaiming Christensen a "paragon of integrity." In other words, the indicted man's surrogates were out in force, and they were out on time to make the early deadlines of eastern newspa-

Sitrick takes it as a compliment that a former client refers to him as "the meanest son of a bitch I've ever worked with."

have molested children or of an actress (Halle Berry) who was accused of hit-and-run or of an executive (the Getty's former CEO, Barry Munitz) who abused his power? Sitrick recently handled the press for the entertainment lawyer Terry Christensen, the biggest name yet to be indicted in the biggest Hollywood scandal in years. The reaction by Christensen and his partners on hearing that he would be charged with hiring private detective Anthony Pellicano to conduct an illegal wiretap during the ugly divorce pro-

pers. As a result, the first-day stories, usually the exclusive province of the prosecution, were brimming with the kind of supportive utterances (Glaser told reporters that Christensen was "a wonderful lawyer, a wonderful friend") that generally don't see print until later. Not that any of this could negate the impact of the *Los Angeles Times*'s front-page headline: "Lawyer Indicted in P1 Inquiry."

That Sitrick's name is usually connected to bad news is problematic. "Mike's become known as the » **CONTINUED ON PAGE 196**

Call Mike Sitrick

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 77 » guy to go to when you're in a jam, and because of that a lot of clients have second thoughts about hiring him," says Carol Stogsdill. No wonder. At times it seems as if the publicist represents a veritable rogues' gallery. "When a company hires Sitrick, it immediately tells me that they're in a desperate situation," says Lukove. "Firing him indicates that a client is either in deep shit or is about to go after someone. Lately, Mike's taken to asking me not to mention him when he calls to plant a story. But that's always a deal breaker. He's now part of the story." Indeed, when the archdiocese engaged Sitrick, the *Los Angeles Times* headlined the fact, thereby drawing more attention to the church's problem with sexually wayward priests.

There are also occasions when Sitrick's ministrations backfire, as some feel they did in 2005, when his firm handled public relations for the Los Angeles Dodgers. At a Sitrick executive's suggestion, new owner Frank McCourt dismissed most of the team's communications staff. "There were a lot of ruffled feathers, but in the end Frank was the only judge and he was happy," says a Sitrick employee. Within the Dodger organization many are less charitable, maintaining that the firm's involvement was heavy-handed and led to a year of rocky coverage.

Even so, among Los Angeles publicists the 59-year-old Sitrick is unrivaled, and nationwide he has only a few peers, among them New York's Gershon Kekst, whose clients include Marc Rich, the unsavory Wall Street tycoon who received a much-disputed presidential pardon from Bill Clinton, and Washington's Eric Dezenhall, who represents Exxon Mobil in its fights with Greenpeace. In 2005, Sitrick and Company claimed revenues approaching \$30 million, and while Sitrick won't be specific, he boasts that his profit margins beat the industry standard of 15 percent. "Nobody else in town is doing as well," he says. Sitrick is contemplating taking the firm public and possibly even purchasing several boutique agencies to widen his reach. As for the aura of scandal and disrepute his name often evokes, that's not necessarily bad. For one thing, Sitrick believes he's doing honorable work. "Do we take tough situations?" he asks. "Yes. But more often than not, the situation is not

what meets the eye." (The only potential clients the publicist will admit to turning down are Michael Jackson and O.J. Simpson.) For another, in a city that produces an endless supply of dreadful behavior by the wealthy, famous, and influential and in an era when the media manifest an insatiable appetite for dirt, being the publicist to the beautiful and damned is good business. "I was talking to Bert Fields earlier today," Sitrick says one afternoon, referring to the entertainment lawyer many believe to be a primary target of the Pellicano probe. "A number of his partners are urging him to use me. I've offered to help him out."



ON A SUNDAY in late January, 30,000 feet in the air somewhere over the Midwest, Mike Sitrick was immersed in *The New York Times*. On the front page of the business section, beneath the deceptively bland headline "All's Not Quiet on the Military Supply Front," was one of the most devastating articles he'd ever read. The piece concerned DHB Industries, the leading supplier of bulletproof vests to American troops in Iraq. The body armor, the story asserted, was putting the lives of the soldiers who wore it at risk. It got worse. David H. Brooks, DHB's founder, had profited from government contracts to the tune of \$186 million. In November he'd thrown a \$10 million bat mitzvah party for his daughter atop Rockefeller Center, flying in the musicians 50 Cent and Don Henley on his company jet. Brooks began the evening in a metal-studded leather suit, later changing into a hot pink suede ensemble. Grabbing his BlackBerry, Sitrick composed a text message to his New York office. The next morning an e-mail went out to Brooks. It read, "We are a PR firm that specializes in dealing with the media in difficult situations. Please call us if you'd like to arrange a meeting." Two days later Sitrick was sitting in Brooks's Long Island headquarters. "The first thing David told me," Sitrick says, "was 'I want you to spend some time learning everything about our company.' The first thing I told him was 'I can do that later. Right now, your house is burning down, and I'm here to put out the fire.'"

Sitrick's immediate task was to head off a journalistic feeding frenzy, and he did so by simultaneously praising the *Times* piece to inquiring reporters and casting aspersions on

it. From a desk in Brooks's office he told writers from *Forbes* and Bloomberg News Service that the article was so thorough, there was nothing left to say. "I don't have the power to stop reporters," he says, "but if I can show them there's no news, that'll stop them. They don't want to do a story someone else has already done." By the same token, Sitrick denigrated aspects of the piece, saying that the studies it cited suggesting flaws in DHB's vests were themselves flawed. Following a flurry of calls, the publicist believed he'd convinced both organizations to back off. Others weren't so easily persuaded, for one, *Newsday*, the Long Island daily. "It's in their backyard," Sitrick says. "We have to play ball with them." Yet to the extent possible, the publicist adds, the game will proceed by his ground rules.

This is how Sitrick and Company works. Even when confronted with a public relations disaster, the firm tries to take command. "When reporters phone Mike," says Carol Stogsdill, "they always get the impression that he's been helpful. But then they hang up and realize that he's demanded that all their questions must be submitted in writing or by e-mail and that if they even hope to talk to his client they have to do it on his terms."

Sitrick's belief that he can dictate coverage springs in large part from his firm's composition. Unlike most other public relations practices, Sitrick and Company almost exclusively hires ex-journalists. "When I started the firm," he says, "I thought it would be easier to teach journalists what PR is than to teach publicists what journalism is." Among Sitrick's 50 employees are former senior-level staffers from the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Orange County Register*, *Newsweek*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and such broadcast outlets as NPR and KCBS. Although these staffers work in different areas—30 percent of the firm's business involves bankruptcies, 30 percent mergers and acquisitions and corporate governance, 30 percent litigation and crisis management, and 10 percent entertainment in a division that concentrates on misbehaving celebrities and controversial movies like *The Da Vinci Code* and is run by former *Buzz* magazine editor Allan Mayer—what they have in common is they know how the press operates and are not intimidated by it. Indeed, a hallmark of the firm is its willingness to cross a traditionally inviolable line, treating major news organizations as if they were

bullies in need of a public thrashing. Sitrick was one of the earliest to understand that many Americans no longer see the press as a champion of what's good and right but as an insular, elite law unto itself.

Sitrick first challenged a media Goliath in 1996, when he was hired to represent Food Lion, a North Carolina-based grocery chain whose meat department employees had been portrayed selling rancid beef and poultry in a hidden-camera investigation by ABC's *Prime Time Live*. In the wake of the report, the company's stock value plunged 25 percent, and it was forced to close 88 stores. Although Food Lion, contending that ABC's reporters had misrepresented themselves to gain access to its stores, won a trespassing suit against the network, the lasting damage was in the realm of public opinion. To combat the perception that the chain purveyed unhealthy fare, Sitrick called attention to outtakes from the *Prime Time Live* footage that revealed the newsmagazine's producers had deleted sequences in which employees stated that supervisors actually instructed them to discard suspect meat. Ultimately, Marvin Kalb, at the time the Edward R. Murrow Professor of Press and Public Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, weighed in with a column in *The Washington Post* criticizing *Prime Time Live*. The publicist had reframed the argument, making ABC appear to be the negligent party.

The prevailing view at Sitrick and Company is that most stories and reporters can be at the least strongly influenced. One of Sitrick's favorite gambits is "the Lead Steer." He frequently uses it when clients are besieged by negative pack coverage. His thinking is that if he can turn a single respected writer around, he can reverse the trend and maybe even start a stampede in the other direction. "There's an impression among a lot of publicists," says Sitrick, "that you want to deal with lightweight journalists. That's okay on a one-off story, but on a big piece you want a Mike Wallace." When the publicist was representing the actress Kim Basinger during her 1993 bankruptcy case, he says he used Judy Brennan, of the *Los Angeles Times*, as his lead steer. "She did a sympathetic article, and her piece reversed the way people thought of Kim." Less ingenious but also effective are "Truth Squads." During a full-out crisis, Sitrick assigns staffers to monitor all press mentions of a client with an eye to

knocking down inaccuracies. Should a factual error regarding, say, Rush Limbaugh, appear on CNN, an employee immediately calls the cable network's Atlanta newsroom asking that the material be stricken from later broadcasts. In a similar vein, the firm always conducts independent research on its clients. That way, not only is Sitrick ready for queries from news organizations, but he is typically out in front of their reporters.

Sitrick often turns to the Internet to shift the battle to a field where those he represents can control if not the content of a story, then at least the context in which it's presented. The publicist first used this ploy in 1999 after learning that his client Metabolife, a San Diego-based manufacturer of herbal dietary supplements, was to be the subject of what it perceived as a hostile piece on ABC's *20/20*. Sitrick dictated the setting where the network's correspondent

never more so than during the campaign he orchestrated against the Walt Disney Company and its chairman and chief executive, Michael Eisner. The fight began in 2003, the Sunday before Thanksgiving, when Sitrick walked into the conference room of his longtime client Shamrock Capital Advisors in Burbank. Sitting around a table were Walt Disney's nephew Roy, Roy's wife, Patty Stanley Gold, who runs Shamrock for Roy, and the firm's lawyer. Three days earlier, at a bar in Pasadena, the 73-year-old Roy had been informed that Eisner wanted him off the board and out of the company. The edict was the culmination of a battle over the direction of the studio between the chairman and Roy and Gold, major Disney stockholders. "We got Mike involved within 24 hours of Roy's meeting in Pasadena with Eisner's rude emissary," says Gold. "On that Sunday we decided that Roy wouldn't go quietly into the night."

SITRICK IS EXTREMELY GUARDED. THE ONLY POTENTIAL CLIENTS HE WILL ADMIT TO TURNING DOWN ARE MICHAEL JACKSON AND O.J. SIMPSON.

could interview Metabolife chairman Michael Ellis (a school auditorium packed with company employees), and he also arranged for an outside film crew to shoot the session. Then he put the entire encounter on the Web, spending \$1.5 million on newspaper and radio ads to promote the site. The tactic had its flaws, among them that it called wider attention both to Metabolife's use of the controversial substance ephedra and to Ellis's 1990 conviction for his connection to a methamphetamine lab. Still, Sitrick had ensured that his client could state its case in an unedited format, and he had stolen a march on *20/20*, diminishing the newsworthiness of its broadcast. Last year the publicist concocted a version of the same strategy to help the archdiocese, launching LA-Clergycases.com, a site devoted to refuting what the church's lawyers maintain are mistakes in the *Los Angeles Times*'s coverage of the ongoing sex abuse scandal.

Sitrick's penchant for controversial tactics has, not surprisingly, made him controversial,

In the days following the session in Burbank, Sitrick worked with Shamrock executives on a letter of resignation from Roy to Eisner that not only would deny the chairman the pleasure of ousting Roy but would be a *casus belli* as well. The letter was a masterpiece of righteous indignation that used the occasion to lay out a long list of Eisner's purported failures in running Disney, its theme parks, and ABC. That the document's tone contradicted the widely held perception of Roy as a genial soul only made it more powerful. On November 30, Sitrick released the letter simultaneously to *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. This was the opening shot in what the author James B. Stewart would call, in his book of the same name, "Disney War."

In the Disney Company and Eisner—whose demise was the objective of Roy and Gold's offensive—Sitrick was confronting resourceful and skilled opponents. Not only did the chairman control his board and the institutional investors who made up a large percentage of Disney stockholders, but in

Zenia Mucha, a former spokeswoman for New York governor George Pataki, Disney had its own smart, tough public relations counsel. Moreover, Disney also called on such outside publicity advisers as Gershon Kekst. As Sitrick conceived it, the plan was both simple and audacious. The first thing he did was to make a favorite move, engaging Brian Glicklich, a vice president of Premiere Radio and Webmaster for Rush Limbaugh, to design SaveDisney.com. The site featured the sort of provocative elements (inflammatory graphics and emotional rhetoric) favored by the conservative polemicist. Disney executives complained that it was rife with inaccuracies, but in the kind of battle Sitrick was waging, such protests were almost beside the point. The site gave Roy and Gold a direct channel to stockholders, allowing the two to get out their main message: Eisner was wasting the company's money. "Mike was way ahead of the power curve," says Gold. "He made Eisner play catch-up."

Sitrick presented Roy and Gold to their best advantage. Under the publicist's tutelage Roy—who owns a castle in Ireland—came off in the press as a populist hero, while Gold—a cigar-chomping provocateur—seemed the voice of reason and calm. In most pieces the men appeared as worthy successors to Walt's legacy. The only stumble came when Seth Lubove, at the time writing for *Forbes*, broke the news that Roy and Gold, far from simply owning shares in kid-friendly companies like Disney, were also investors in an Israeli defense contractor and a condom manufacturer.

The battle came to its conclusion in March 2004 in Philadelphia, where the day before Disney's annual meeting Sitrick staged an alternative gathering that attracted hundreds of dissident stockholders and where Roy and Gold were greeted like corporate freedom fighters. At the annual meeting itself, Eisner received a 43 percent no-confidence vote. It was a stunning defeat. A year later he resigned.

The verdict on all this is mixed. Those inside Disney contend that Eisner intended to resign anyway, pointing out that he was replaced by his handpicked successor, Robert Iger. They also say that Roy and Gold, rather than press a proxy fight against a recalcitrant board, eventually folded their hand. On top of this, they maintain, the two and their publicist created unnecessary discord. "The rules Sitrick

abides by may not be the ones I abide by," says Mucha. "He has to live by them, and he will be judged by them. I think I hold myself to a little higher standard." Among those who covered the story, though, there is no doubt about Sitrick's performance. It was, as *BusinessWeek's* Ron Grover puts it, "magnificent." He took two men who could have appeared weak and ridiculous and enabled them to top-ple the most powerful figure in Hollywood.

Sitrick defends his methods not just in the Disney case but across the board. "There's one cardinal rule here," he says. "We never lie. I don't think every journalist likes me, but I don't think you'll find any who'll say I've lied to them." Carol Stogsdill concurs. "I once heard Mike tell a pro sports owner we represented that the reason the press was killing him was that he was so obnoxious. It's ironic that Mike's the author of a book [with Allan Mayer] titled *Spin*. He doesn't spin." Many reporters agree. While Sitrick believes he can control the press, he paradoxically believes in the press. Unlike such influential Los Angeles publicists as Pat Kingsley, who typically deny access to the celebrities they represent, essentially saying "No comment" to any and all queries, Sitrick rarely denies access and almost never says "No comment." His philosophy is that if his clients don't tell their stories, someone else will.

There is, however, an opposing view. It holds that Sitrick is unctuous, slippery, and meddling. Although no one accuses him of dealing in misinformation, there's a strong feeling that he's happy to throw journalists off track. "I've seen him bamboozle reporters," says Lubove. A standard Sitrick maneuver is to envelop writers in a fog of meaningless details. When journalist Mim Udovitch was assigned by *Radar* to investigate whether the Kabbalah Center was a cult organization, Sitrick and Company inundated her with material. Indeed, the publicist contends that his staff kept her occupied so long that the firm can take credit for the article's appearance in the relative oblivion of the magazine's online edition instead of in print as originally planned. "We just kept feeding her facts and facts and facts," says Tammy Taylor, who handled the case for Sitrick, "until basically she had so much information she couldn't get the piece done on time." Udovitch denies Taylor's claim. Indeed, her piece on the Kabbalah Center

presented it as an "organization more committed to questionable financial deals and celebrity wrangling than to advancing an ancient Jewish mystical approach to life." The article highlighted the center's self-serving involvement with Madonna and other pop icons and delved into the dubious contention that its "pricey accessories...can cure...illnesses." To which Sitrick says, "She was at first pursuing a lot of horrible, personal things about brainwashing and money. We showed them to be not accurate, and they never went into the story, which is to her credit. It is my experience that this is more often than not what happens."

How frequently Sitrick exerts direct influence on the contents of a story is impossible to say; as few reporters will speak about him either on the record or off. Which of course suggests that his impact on not just what stays out of print but on what gets in is considerable. "All I can tell you," says Lubove, who's covered the publicist for years and is one of the only journalists who talk openly about him, "is that if you see a scoop in the paper about a deal involving one of Mike's clients, he more than likely gift wrapped it for them. But they don't want that known. Nobody wants to be called a lead steer. It's demeaning."

HANGING PROMINENTLY on a wall in Mike Sitrick's office is a recent photograph of his 81-year-old father in a Chicago Cubs jersey on the mound of Wrigley Field throwing out a ceremonial first pitch. J. Herman Sitrick runs an advertising agency that bears his name. He still puts in a full week, and the Cubs are his marquee account. Mike, no matter how crazed with work, speaks to him almost every day.

Sitrick and his two younger brothers grew up in a nondescript five-room house on a narrow lot on the South Side of Chicago. Though their father, at the time an ad salesman for WGN, made a decent living, the boys' childhoods were shaped by their working-class, ethnic neighborhood. The Italians fought with the Irish, the blacks fought with the Serbs, and the Jews fought with them all. When Mike was 15, five kids from a parochial school jumped him. He hit one in the face, drawing blood, before they all piled on, rolling him down a set of stairs and breaking his nose. Another time he was knifed beneath a viaduct.

"You had to be street smart," Sitrick says. "A bully once had me on my knees. He was mad at me for some reason and said, 'Say you're sorry.' I said, 'F you.' That's how it was. You were better off standing up to a bully and losing than running away. But stuff like this didn't happen often. I had big friends, physically big kids, the tough guys of the school, and people knew I had big friends. Kids knew not to bother us.

"Once my brother David got beat up by five or six guys. He came running home, and my dad says, 'Send Mike back to talk to me.' I told Dad I was going to go beat the kids up who beat David up. I said I'd take care of it. But Dad said, 'No, David can do it himself. What I want you to do is go with him and make sure it's a fair fight, one on one.' So David and I went back, and I walked right up to the toughest kid and put him in a headlock and said, 'Okay, now it's going to be a fair fight.' And David took on just one guy and popped him in the face. The kid's mother came out and said, 'How can you stand by and watch this?' I said, 'You didn't say anything when he and his friends beat up my brother.' You didn't talk back to adults like that in my day, but I did." In a sense, Sitrick has been doing so ever since.

After starting his career in the press office of the agricultural division of the University of Maryland, his alma mater, Sitrick spent the 1970s working in various public relations jobs in his hometown. Following a stint handling the media for Mayor Richard Daley's Department of Human Resources, he joined Selz, Seabolt & Associates, where he won modest acclaim for a campaign promoting Miracle White laundry detergent for its supposed utility in fighting pollution. At the National Can Corporation, he attracted a bit more notice by making his chief executive a spokesman against hiring illegal immigrants. In 1981, he moved to California with his wife and three daughters to take a position as director of communications for the Wickes Companies, a giant home supply and furniture concern.

The Wall Street Journal made Sitrick. In 1985, the paper published a 4,000-word front-page piece on Wickes. The story, written by Stephen J. Sansweet, detailed how the company emerged from what at the time was the second-largest Chapter 11 bankruptcy filing in U.S. history. The story stuck out because of the deal that Sitrick made with its writer. Dur-

ing the 33 months corporate turnaround artist Sanford Sigoloff needed to restore Wickes to profitability, Sansweet was given unrestricted access to every meeting and memo. In return he promised not to write about the most sensitive aspects of what he learned until after the reorganization was finished. "Mike could have really got hurt on this one," says Sansweet. "He had to trust that I'd honor the ground rules, and even then, when you're dealing with the *Journal*, there are no guarantees about the final results."

The *Journal* article depicted Sigoloff as a coldhearted operator who referred to himself as "Ming the Merciless" and fired 2,600 employees a few days before Christmas. It detailed ruptured friendships and infighting, but in almost every other way it was a positive portrait. Here was the story of a company that had done what it takes, no matter how wrenching, to put its financial house in order. Fierce budget cuts, aggressive marketing, self-discipline—this was an account of management determination and corporate success. Sansweet was Sitrick's first lead steer.

For Sitrick, Wickes's resurrection produced many rewards. As one of the company's senior officers, he received a generous bonus package. Suddenly, he was a millionaire. Of even greater worth, however, was the friendship he formed with Sansweet. During the period the reporter covered Wickes, an assignment that in the end resulted in 19 front-page stories, he and the publicist spent countless hours together. In 1989, when Sitrick formed his own firm, Sansweet, who had become the *Journal's* Los Angeles bureau chief, smoothed the way. "I must have made half a dozen calls on Mike's behalf to *Journal* reporters and bureau chiefs around the country," Sansweet says. "I'd say, 'You're going to be hearing from this guy Mike Sitrick.' They'd say, 'Aren't you friends?' I'd say, 'You know me, if the story is negative, write it. But I think you can trust him.' In this way Mike became a known quantity around the *Journal*."

Valuable as Sitrick's relationships at the *Journal* would prove, he could never have exploited them had his new firm not been able to attract the sort of powerful clients whose controversial business dealings would make for good copy. "I think we were the first company Mike represented," says Stanley Gold. At the time Gold and Roy Disney hired the publicist, Shamrock was attempt-

ing a hostile takeover of Massachusetts-based Polaroid, and they were being portrayed in the Boston newspapers as pirates who wanted to strip the revered company of its assets. In short order Sitrick contacted a business reporter at *The Boston Globe* and offered to fly Gold in for an interview. The paper agreed, and the resulting piece did much to paint Shamrock in a more flattering light. Ultimately, Gold and Disney dropped their bid, but not before profiting from their stock holdings in Polaroid by a reported \$50 million. Ever since, says Gold, "Mike has been on retainer off and on."

An equally important early Sitrick client was the oil baron and longtime 20th Century Fox chairman Marvin Davis, whose portfolio of companies included Texas-based Spectradyne, a concern that distributed pay-per-view movies to hotels and resorts. In 1991, the publicist recalls, Davis summoned him and made what seemed like an impossible request. Spectradyne was hemorrhaging so much money that he was going to have to place it in bankruptcy, but he didn't want any publicity. Everything Davis did was, of course, fodder for the national media. It would not be easy to keep his name out of the papers. There was, however, a shot, and Sitrick took it, sending the press release regarding the SEC filings mandatory in such cases to the Dallas bureau of *The Wall Street Journal* a couple of hours after the markets had closed. When the news moved on the Dow Jones wire, it wasn't picked up on either coast. "So began a very long and a very close relationship," says Sitrick. In fact, the publicist would represent Davis not only for the rest of his life but into the afterlife, defending him and his estate against allegations of financial impropriety made by his daughter in 2005.

From the outset Sitrick secured a number of high-profile bankruptcy clients, including Orange County, the nation's largest municipality ever to seek such protection, and the retailer Barneys New York. At the same time, he started representing both individuals and institutions caught up in ugly situations. When the actor Kelsey Grammer was accused of molesting his underage baby-sitter, he hired Sitrick, as did Riverside County when its police officers fired on a black teenager named Tyisha Miller, whose sole provocation appeared to be falling asleep with a gun on her lap in a car parked at a gas

station. Sitrick so thoroughly refuted the charges promulgated by Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton that Riverside County was a "racist community" that Beverly Hills, after its officers were accused of targeting African American motorists for "driving while black," brought him on board as well.

For all of Sitrick's audacity in championing difficult and at times dubious sorts, his enormous fees received almost as much attention. The bill for his work on the Orange County bankruptcy case was \$450,776, while the tab for his efforts for Riverside County came to \$227,750. Both governments protested, although in each instance the publicist countered that he saved them millions. In 1998, Dr. Steven M. Hoeftlin, Michael Jackson's plastic surgeon, sued Sitrick for overcharging him. The physician had engaged the publicist to combat allegations that he'd molested patients while they were under anesthesia. The two settled their differences, but Sitrick's reputation as an expensive commodity was fixed. "My hourly rate is high, but it makes sense for both us and the client," he says. "The client knows exactly what he's paying for. A lot of firms do what I call 'buffet PR.' They charge you \$10,000 a month for as much as you can eat. The agency does as little as possible, and the client wants as much as possible."

By far Sitrick's most lucrative client was one of his most troubled, the much-reviled telecommunications giant Global Crossing. During the mid-1990s, the publicist had represented Gary Winnick, the company's chairman, in a fight with the Reverend Sun Myung Moon over control of the Nostalgia Network. Winnick then hired him in 1998 to handle the press on Global Crossing's initial public offering, enabling Sitrick to invest in the company on the ground floor. At the height of the dot-com bubble, as investors bet on Global Crossing's ability to provide high-speed Internet access to a seemingly unquenchable market, the value of those shares increased by huge multiples, but when the bubble burst, it declined from \$64 to \$1. Sitrick handled the company's Chapter 11 filing. Despite the publicist's efforts, Winnick—who earned \$700 million while his stockholders lost billions—became a symbol of the era's wretched excess. No amount of public relations could improve his image. Still, Sitrick and Winnick remain close. While the publicist rode half

of his shares down, he sold the other half before the stock tanked. "Mike," says a friend, "made a shitload of money on Global Crossing."

Which is how it goes for members of Los Angeles's centurion class, those fixers and promoters who are outrageously rewarded for representing the seriously guilty and the truly wealthy. Until recently Sitrick could not have become part of this group, as most of its members are lawyers and financial advisers. But as the media have assumed center stage, America's courts and boardrooms are no longer the only meaningful arenas. Now the playing field has spread into a far more subjective realm, where the rules are uncertain, the referees ineffectual, and whirl is king. Those who can handle today's press, shepherding clients through the valleys of death and delivering them to better and sometimes even favorable coverage, are the most valued warriors of all.

Sitrick will not discuss his personal wealth—"I'm pretty secretive," he says. "I come from the school that the amount of money you have is nobody's business"—but it's there for all to see, testimony to his work for everyone from the archdiocese to the Getty, Rush Limbaugh to Ron Burkle. By fighting their fights in the media, he has moved, if not into their league, then at least into their neighborhood. In 1995, Sitrick built a 10,000-square-foot Hawaiian-plantation-style mansion with nine bathrooms in a gated community in Pacific Palisades. With the Global Crossing money he built a 6,500-square-foot weekend home on Malibu's Broad Beach. The house is next door to that of William Morris Agency president Jim Wyatt (a client) and down the road from that of Michael Ovitz (also a client, the former agent having recently hired the publicist to represent him in the Pellicano case). For a while Sitrick drove a red Ferrari 355. A silver-and-blue Shelby Series One and a silver-and-black Porsche 911 followed. At one point there was a Dodge Viper. Now Sitrick drives something with more gravitas—a 1971 Mercedes 280 SE 3.5 convertible with a beige exterior and a brown leather interior. Fewer than a thousand of this model were imported to the United States, making the car both a rarity and an emblem.

"The only other person I know who has one," says Sitrick, "is Robert Shapiro," O.J. Simpson's lawyer. "It's silver." **LA**