

RB lawyers represent key player in Simpson case

The two-man firm of Mark Haushalter and Ryan Okabe are the attorneys for Tom Riccio, the man who taped the incident in the hotel room.

By Denise Nix
Staff Writer

For most attorneys, touting your stuff in the national spotlight is the ultimate publicity dream.

So when the opportunity arose last week for Redondo Beach attorneys Mark Haushalter and Ryan Okabe, they seized it - even though it meant taking center stage in the latest O.J. Simpson court circus.

"With all the media spotlight, it's exciting, but it's a great opportunity to let people see that a local firm, completely dedicated to its clients, can be out there with the big boys," Okabe said.

The attorneys got their big television break, Okabe said, when a lawyer friend referred Tom Riccio to their firm.

Riccio, a sports memorabilia dealer, was the one who set up and recorded the audiotapes of the Sept. 13 meeting between Simpson and two sports memorabilia dealers in Las Vegas, then sold them to a celebrity gossip Web site.

Riccio doesn't trust Alfred Beardsley, one of the dealers, so he secretly recorded the meeting - as he has done with nearly every conversation he's had with this "unsavory character" who "burned him" in the past, Haushalter said.

Beardsley and another dealer claim Simpson and a group of men came to the meeting Riccio arranged at a Palace Station hotel room, then demanded at gunpoint that the two dealers turn over autographed footballs and other collectors items.

Riccio has said he did not reveal that Simpson, whom he described as a "collector" to the dealers, was coming or that he planned to seize the items.

Simpson has said he believes the items were stolen from him.

Simpson, his friends and the dealers were arrested. Beardsley is being held on a California parole violation, according to news reports.

Simpson was allowed to post \$120,000 bail and return to his Florida home. He is expected to return to the Clark County Courthouse next month on the charges that could send him to prison for life.

Despite accusations that their client set up Simpson, Okabe and Haushalter want the record clear that that was never Riccio's intention.

Now, under an immunity deal, Riccio is cooperating with Las Vegas authorities.

On Friday, under Okabe's and Haushalter's watchful eyes, police officers came to Riccio's El Sereno home and seized numerous audio recordings, the attorneys said.

With television news cameras rolling, the legal duo stood fast to their commitment to not discuss what was in the recordings or other specifics about the case, citing the ongoing investigation.

Nor would they comment on Riccio's own criminal past, saying it is irrelevant to the current case.

However, if Simpson does go to trial, Riccio will likely be the government's star witness.

"He will cooperate," Okabe told the Daily Breeze on Monday. "He has no reason to lie and no reason to be anything but completely forthcoming with any of his testimony."

While Okabe & Haushalter may be a small, two-man firm, it has had a few dealings with celebrity clients.

Haushalter represented famed attorney Steven Lerman in a misdemeanor case stemming from an altercation with staff at a Manhattan Beach eatery.

The firm has also worked with suite-mate Tony Capozzola on another celebrity-turned-defendant. They helped file Michael Jackson's malicious prosecution case against the Santa Barbara officials who charged him with child molestation.

In addition, they represented a screenwriter for the "Sopranos" in an insurance fraud case regarding "borrowed" Ferraris.

The South Bay natives, who are lifelong friends, said they've learned from these other cases to remain calm in the media glare and to be sure to put their clients' interests first.

"We take it in stride," Okabe said. "We're very good at what we do."