



Remembering Judge John Shabaz

*By John Skilton and John Vaudreuil**



On August 31, 2012, Retired U.S. District Judge for the Western District of Wisconsin John Shabaz passed away at the age of 81. Judge Shabaz was widely respected in the legal community, particularly for his impact on the caseload and reputation of the Western District, where he served as an active judge for 28 years.

Judge Shabaz was born in Milwaukee and grew up in Wisconsin, attending the University of Wisconsin - Madison for his undergraduate degree. He served in the army for two years and then earned his law degree from Marquette University in 1957.

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After graduation he entered private practice and joined his father's law firm. In 1964 he was elected to the state assembly as a Republican representing the western Milwaukee-area communities of Waukesha and New Berlin, and he served as the house minority leader from 1973 to 1979. He remained in the state legislature until his nomination to the federal bench by President Reagan on November 4, 1981.

Judge Shabaz had an immediate impact on the Western District, and he is closely associated with the transformation of that court into one of the nation's first "rocket dockets." When he joined the court more than 1200 cases were pending, and he moved swiftly to address both the backlog and the time between filing and verdict for new cases. Along with Judge Barbara Crabb, he worked long hours and heard motions late into the day and on short notice. Litigants filing in the Western District soon received firm trial dates and tight discovery schedules that forced them to streamline their cases and focus on the essential disputes. Judge Shabaz and Judge Crabb were ahead of the curve in implementing these reforms. The Western District of Wisconsin became an "Early Implementation" court under the 1990 Civil Justice Act, which sought to improve litigation management and reduce cost and delay. The Western District Advisory Group, established under that Act, "strongly commended" Judge Shabaz and Judge Crabb, and noted in particular the "uniform praise" for the court's efficiency and the hard work of the judges. The Advisory Group stressed its wish to "publicly state its thanks and appreciation to both judges."

Within his own courtroom, Judge Shabaz's commanding presence and commitment to the just and speedy resolution of cases made him the object of tremendous respect and even fear on the part of litigators. Litigants quickly learned not to challenge his authority or to attempt to slow down proceedings, and no

one in his courtroom worked harder than he did.

Attorney John Skilton, who appeared in front of Judge Shabaz dozens of times, commented that "although Judge Shabaz was tough and unyielding on the bench, once you knew and played by his rules, you would be treated fairly and given full opportunity to present your client's case. If there was one overriding feature to being in his courtroom, it was that all litigants, and their counsel, were treated the same – without undue deference to status, wealth, power or reputation."

U.S. Attorney John Vaudreuil, who tried over 30 jury trials in front of Judge Shabaz, commented: "Judge Shabaz was protective of jurors' time, and insisted that we lawyers focus on what truly mattered in the case. He did what a good judge should do — he worked extremely hard, read everything the litigants filed, and listened closely to all the arguments. Most importantly, he was decisive. Even when we disagreed, I was honored to be in his court."

Judge Shabaz will be remembered as intelligent, hard working, and scrupulously even-handed. He left a lasting legacy in the Western District, one that is very tough to emulate. He is greatly missed. Judge Shabaz is survived by his wife, Patty, and four children.