

Memorial for Judge Bill Stiehl

U.S. District Judge William D. Stiehl, who after a 28-year judicial career, died Monday Feb. 8, 2016. He was 90 and a lifelong resident of Belleville, Illinois.

Appointed to the federal bench by President Ronald Reagan, Judge Stiehl served from 1986 until he went on inactive status as a senior judge in January 2014.

He graduated from Belleville Township High School, the University of North Carolina and the St. Louis University School of Law. He served in the Navy as a lieutenant on board a ship in the Pacific during World War II, briefly as future entertainer Johnny Carson's roommate. He returned to Navy service during the Korean War and was a lawyer on the U.S. Armistice Negotiation Staff.

In 1947, Judge Stiehl married Celeste Sullivan of Belleville. He was elected in 1948 to the Belleville Township High School and Junior College Board of Education and again in 1954, and was its president for two years.

Judge Stiehl practiced law in Belleville and became active in Republican politics. He was elected chairman of the St. Clair County Republican Central Committee in 1960, and served on the GOP state central committee

Judge Stiehl presided over hundreds of criminal cases, including the trial of Thomas Venezia, who ran an empire of topless clubs and illegal video gambling in the Metro East until his conviction in 1996. Part of his sentence was ordering one of the clubs set aside for a youth center in Washington Park. I suggested to Bill that he send me in undercover to get more evidence, but he didn't think that was a good idea.

His signature sentence was the one he imposed upon Matthews & Wright, a New York investment company that pleaded guilty of fraud in 1990 over its phony plan for financing riverfront development in East St. Louis. He ordered it to give \$7 million to the Greater East St. Louis Community Fund, which provided money for causes such as trash removal, scholarships and 911 service.

In 1995, he ordered a company that ran prostitution at sex clubs in Brooklyn to deposit \$1 million in a similar fund for that impoverished community.

Judge Stiehl saw the funds as way to help the residents. Rather than have fines go into the giant maw of the (U.S.) Treasury, he wanted to find a way for the money to work for the citizens, without local political infighting: He went to work every day in East St. Louis and saw the problems. He did his best to do what was right.

He was a longtime member of Ainad Shrine and was a Master Mason. Judge Stiehl was in the Navy Reserve from 1943 to 1973, retiring as a commander.

In addition to his wife he is survived by his son, Attorney Bill Stiehl Jr., a daughter, Susan Guthrie of Springfield, Va.; four grand- children; and one great-granddaughter.

On a more personal note, Bill was a colleague and friend whose life touched mine as he did all of his colleagues in the Southern District. When I was appointed to the bench in 1992, his words of encouragement and support as well as counsel and advice was heartening to the new kid on the block, especially during my tenure as chief judge.

Bill was a man who dedicated his life to the profession of law and the judiciary, exemplified by the fact that he remained on the bench handling and trying cases for over 20 years after he took senior status. He possessed all the qualities that are necessary to be a fair and impartial judge. He was a man of integrity and high moral standards.

He was a people person and had a special kind of warmth, personality, and wit that drew people to him like a magnet. I never saw him lose his temper whether in chambers or court and for a sometimes stubborn German that can be hard to do. He had the patience of Job and his judicial temperament was a quality that should be an example to all judges. He treated all in his courtroom with respect, courtesy, and dignity. Upon Judge Stiehl passing, Chief Judge Reagan noted that Judge Stiehl was a consummate judge and public servant who treated everyone with dignity, respect and compassion.

I last saw Judge Stiehl about two months before his death. I went by his house on my way to the East St. Louis Courthouse. Even in failing health he was clear in mind and thought and when I left I said to myself what a truly remarkable man. Fortunately, on December 15th, just a few weeks before his death he was able to attend the unvailing of his portrait that hangs on the wall in the Atrium in the East St. Louis Courthouse. His last public appearance.

Can one person make a difference? Bill Stiehl did. He made a difference in the lives of all he touched and his legacy will continue to make a difference for many years to come.