

Memorial

The Honorable Richard L. Speer passed away unexpectedly on April 3, 2013. He was 71 years of age at the time of his death. He sat on the Bench of the United States Bankruptcy Court for the Northern District of Ohio for 38 years, the second-longest active bankruptcy judge in the United States. He considered that service an honor and a privilege.

While most of us knew Richard Speer as the formidable Judge Speer, he had many passions beyond his service as a bankruptcy judge. First and foremost among them were his wife of 44 years, Anita, his children Richard, Jr. and Gretchen, his six grandchildren, his two sisters and his brother. At heart, the Judge was always a teacher, having taught for a year at Margareta High School before practicing law in Port Clinton and Oak Harbor. He never stopped teaching his children and his grandchildren and the many law students he mentored the lessons of Civil War and World War II history, the importance of genealogy to a family, the worth of good books and music and the values he lived as a 33rd degree Mason.

Judge Speer was a graduate of Fremont Ross High School, and received his bachelor's of education and law degrees from Ohio Northern University.

He was appointed to the bench by the Honorable Nicholas J. Walinski in 1975 under the Bankruptcy Act, and presided under the Bankruptcy Code, effective 1979 and Bankruptcy Abuse Prevention and Consumer Protection Act, effective 2005. During that time he dealt with over one hundred fourteen thousand bankruptcy cases. The longest case, Bell & Beckwith, spanned almost fourteen years.

No tribute, no memorial can truly communicate the flavor of practice before Judge Speer's bench. Most, if not all, of the attorneys who practiced before the Judge have done so for all of their professional lives. Bankruptcy practice in Toledo will never quite be the same.

During the Bell & Beckwith case, an attorney from a large New York law firm stood, announcing to all and sundry that he was from Shea and Gould.

"Are you Shea?" Judge Speer asked.

"No," came the reply.

"Are you Gould?" the Judge inquired.

"No," came the reply.

"Then it really doesn't matter, does it?" Judge Speer said.

Out-of-town counsel was always met with a warm welcome. "You'll be glad to learn that Toledo has flush toilets," the Judge would say. "Stay for lunch, the local economy needs your money."

Never again will we have Judge Speer lean forward and remind us that ‘pigs get fat and hogs get slaughtered’. We won’t be reminded ‘if it ain’t in writing, it ain’t’ or ‘what the big print giveth, the small print taketh away’.

He always took time to ask the debtors if they had questions. “It’s your money we are talking about,” he’d say during hearings. “Now’s the time to ask.” He was interested in them as people - where they worked, what they did there.

Judge Speer commanded his courtroom, a larger-than-life presence on the bench. He’d wait for stragglers to come into the courtroom before he’d continue to talk. He’d announce new cases from the bench for the benefit of counsel, and even quote Winston Churchill on occasion. Two chairs always faced the bench, and when a case was called, the debtors came forward to face the Judge so he could look them in the eye as he rendered his decisions.

And while he could be blunt, and passionate, and outspoken, he was always, inevitably, fair to the parties before him. He cared for the people who appeared in his courtroom, and yet, never hesitated to deal strongly with anyone who sought to abuse the system.

In the later years, Judge Speer was confined to a wheelchair, and had to cope with the difficulties inherent therein. He did that with strength, courage and grace, and a strong sense of humor, making jokes to make people comfortable with his chair. “I talk to a lot of belt buckles,” he’d say with a warm grin. When the clerk would call ‘All rise’, he’d say ‘Have a seat, I’ll be right with you’, as his chair was wheeled to the lift behind the bench. He dealt with his disability matter-of-factly, and never let it interfere with the performance of his duties.

In the Northern District of Ohio, Western Division we are blessed with a legal community that practices in a rare atmosphere of professional respect and camaraderie. The loss to his family, and our loss, cannot be fully documented here. But it is in our hearts and minds as we continue on with the work that we are charged with. Judge Speer firmly believed that the practice of law was a calling, a profession, not a job. He served his community with honor and integrity.

The greatest tribute we can offer is to do the same.

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