

Judge John W. Potter

Judge John W. Potter once said, “when life offers opportunities, you have to have the courage to grasp them.”

We remember Judge Potter as a true friend and confidant to scores of people, both on and off the Bench and a mentor and father figure to dozens of former law clerks. He was loved and admired by all for his interpersonal skills, his mental acuity, not to mention his legal and judicial abilities. But the smile that invariably comes with recalling Judge Potter almost certainly is associated with his sense of humor. Judge Potter had the innate ability to entertain others, even while delivering the most serious of presentations.

After graduating with honors in 1940 from Toledo University, Judge Potter attended law school at the University of Michigan. However, that education was interrupted by his military service during World War II. All who knew him know that he served as an officer in the Field Artillery because . . . yes, they needed a man of his caliber. His military service included landing at Utah Beach in Normandy and fighting in the Battle of the Bulge, earning the Bronze Star and four battle stars.

After the war, Judge Potter completed his legal education and engaged in the private practice of law before being elected to Toledo City Council. He served as mayor of Toledo from 1961 to '67. As mayor, he took a principled and courageous, albeit politically unpopular, stand in favor of a fair housing ordinance, a position which ultimately cost him the mayoral election.

John Potter grasped the opportunity to continue service to our community as a judge of the Ohio Court of Appeals for the Sixth District until 1982. In that year he was appointed by President Reagan as United States District Judge for the Northern District of Ohio, Western Division, taking an oath to support and defend the United States Constitution so revered by him. But he was always quick to point out that he took his first oath “for life tenure during good behavior” with his wife, Phyllis, years before. Judge Potter served as a district judge and senior district judge until 2004. Thereafter, he returned to the courthouse annually for “Potter’s Pizza Presentation of Supreme Court Precedent,” a gathering of judges and law clerks to watch a video regarding the most recent Supreme Court term and enjoy pizza and good humor, both provided by the Judge.

Judge Potter served as a role model at home as well as at the office, as best exemplified by his unconditional love and loyalty to his wife of 67 years, and his children John, Jr., Carolyn Hoyt, and Kathy Potter, as well as his grandchildren and great grandchildren. Judge Potter was the ultimate gentleman – kind and courteous to counsel and litigants, showing a sincere and abiding respect for all regardless of their station in life. Indeed, he was probably one of the few judges who actually received Christmas cards year after year from persons serving time after being sentenced by him. But Judge Potter’s most endearing quality was his ability to use humor

so effectively. He was a man who could laugh at himself – and usually did right before delivering one of his punch lines, which, as someone once pointed out, was sometimes funnier than his joke. And retelling the same stories over the years seemed to be noticed only by Andy Anderson, one of his dearest and oldest friends. When repetition occurred, Andy would deride his friend John, who would feign surprise. Judge Potter was a consummate reminder to all to not take ourselves too seriously.

Those of us who had the privilege to work for or with Judge Potter, or even to appear before him over a judicial career spanning four decades, carry the indelible imprint of his approach to this profession—and to life.

Judge Potter passed away October 3, 2013, at the age of 94. He served his community and his country with courage, honor, and integrity. We pay tribute to the legacy of Judge John Potter when we, as lawyers and judges, conduct ourselves according to the “Toledo way” of practicing law—and when we think about Christopher Columbus’ fourth ship—you know, the one that sailed off the edge.