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Judge Basil A. Thomas, whose legal career spanned almost 80 years, dies

He had served on the Baltimore City Circuit Court

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Judge Basil A. Thomas ()

By Frederick N. Rasmussen, The Baltimore Sun

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Former Baltimore City Circuit Judge Basil A. Thomas, whose legal career spanned more than seven decades, died Friday of congestive heart failure at the Blakhurst Retirement Community in Towson. He was 98.

"He's my guy. Basil lived a long and full life that was very productive, and you can't ask for any more than that," said retired Chief Judge Robert M. Bell of the Maryland Court of Appeals. "He was a very interesting man and the consummate professional. For him, the rule of law was paramount. He believed it."

"I tried a few cases in front of Basil, and he was a real gentleman and a very polite person. He was the kind of person you wanted to be a judge," said J. Joseph Curran Jr., former Maryland attorney general. "He always respected the role of lawyers arguing their position."

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"Until his death, he was the oldest living judge in Maryland. We're talking about a legal career that spanned 78 years," said Byron L. Warnken, a professor at the **University of Baltimore School of Law** and an attorney who specializes in appellate cases.

The son of a businessman and a homemaker, Basil Anargyros Thomas was born in the Peloponnese, Greece, and immigrated with his parents in 1915 to Portsmouth, Va.

He was raised in Portsmouth and **Newport News**, Va., and graduated in 1931 from **Woodrow Wilson** High School.

He attended the evening division of the College of William & Mary in Norfolk, Va., for a year before moving to Baltimore. He enrolled at the University of Baltimore School of Law, from which he graduated in 1935 at age 20. He was admitted to the Maryland Bar later that year.

Judge Thomas practiced law in Baltimore until the outbreak of World War II, when he enlisted in the Army and served with the Counter Intelligence Corps in Hawaii. While serving with the corps, he received a field commission in military intelligence.

Discharged in 1946, Judge Thomas returned to Baltimore and resumed his legal career, and in the late 1940s established the law firm of Thomas & Peters.

In 1948, he went to work as an administrative assistant to Mayor Thomas D'Alesandro Jr., and then was appointed an assistant city solicitor and later a member of the city's Elections Board.

He resigned that position in 1952 when he ran unsuccessfully in the Democratic primary for the then-newly established 7th Congressional District.

After finishing second in a field of seven candidates, Judge Thomas returned to his law firm, where he continued practicing until 1961, when he was appointed to the old Municipal Court by Gov. J. Millard Tawes.

He won re-election to the court in 1964, and four years later was appointed by Gov. Spiro T. Agnew to the city's Supreme Bench. In 1970, Judge Thomas was elected to serve a full 15-year term to the court, whose name was changed in 1983 to the present Baltimore City Circuit Court.

"Basil always had complete control of his courtroom and wanted to see how issues played out, and he took great pains to arrive at a reasonable decision," said Judge Bell. "He allowed the lawyers to try the case, and he did not interpose himself. He was a lawyer's judge."

Judge Bell said that Judge Thomas was always "engaged."

"Whenever you got in a conversation with him, he was in it but never tried to dominate it. He'd make his point of view known and listen to yours," said Judge Bell.

"He had a very quiet but firm demeanor," said Mr. Warnken, who clerked for Judge Thomas from 1975 to 1977.

"He was a brilliant lawyer, and when we got back to chambers, he'd use the case as an educational experience, and for 21/2 years, I had exposure to one of the greatest legal minds of the day. He was very bright but always maintained a low profile."

Judge Thomas stepped down from the bench in 1983.

"I enjoyed every minute of it," he told The Baltimore Sun at the time. "I feel honored to have had the opportunity to serve, really."

After retiring from the bench, Judge Thomas went to work as counsel to the law firm of Thomas & Libowitz, which had been co-founded by his son, Steven A. Thomas, in 1975.

Judge Thomas relinquished the position in 1993 and was elected to the board of directors of **Sinclair Broadcast Group Inc.** in Hunt Valley.

Judge Thomas began his association with Sinclair in 1986 when it was the target of a takeover and he was brought onboard as an adviser.

"The judge was in the middle, and he made sure we did everything that we needed to do from all perspectives, including the regulatory perspective," said Sinclair CEO **David Smith**. "He was incredibly valuable to the company and had been our guide, teacher and main man."

He had served as chairman of the board's compensation committee and resigned from the board the day before his death.

Judge Thomas, who had lived in the 5600 block of N. **Charles St.** for years, was a resident of Blakehurst for more than a decade.

He had been a member of the Baltimore City, Maryland and American bar associations.

He had served as a director of the Educational Foundation of the University of Baltimore and later served as its chairman, and also as chairman of the university's board of trustees. In his honor, the university's international law library bears his name.

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Judge Thomas was a former president of the Hillendale Country Club and had been president of the Baltimore Host Chapter of Lions International and the Worthington Chapter of AHEPA.

He was also a longtime member of the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of the Annunciation.

"His mind was still 100 percent; it was his body that gave out," said his son, who lives in Lutherville.

His wife of 37 years, the former Helen Pappas, died in 1978.

Services are private.

In addition to his son, Judge Thomas is survived by his wife of 32 years, the former Anastasia Ernestine Karukas; a brother, James A. Thomas of Arlington, Va.; two stepdaughters, Katina Kane of Lutherville and Joanne Miller of New Freedom, Pa.; and eight grandchildren.

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