

# Blanche G. Wahl, retired District Court judge, dies at 100



Judge Blanche Wahl was a former assistant city solicitor who was appointed to the District Court. (Handout)



By **Jacques Kelly**  
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**B**lanche G. Wahl, a retired Baltimore City District Court judge recalled for her common-sense approach to justice, died of Alzheimer's disease complications Feb. 2 at her Mount Washington home. She was 100.

Born on Staten Island, N.Y., she was the daughter of Joseph Genauer, who operated a grocery store, and his wife, Rose, who assisted him.

She obtained a bachelor's degree at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York and was a 1938 graduate of Brooklyn Law School.

According to 1957 Evening Sun article, her career path was influenced by a movie — she saw film actress Ann Harding, in the role of a woman attorney, defend her screen husband in a courtroom scene and decided she would pursue law. She was admitted to the New York bar in 1939 and joined a Wall Street firm where she was the lone female attorney.

“She was a pioneer,” said her daughter, Diana H. Wahl of Arlington, Va. “Women lawyers were rare and Jewish women lawyers were also rare. She faced prejudice but never gave in.”

In 1941 she married Marvin C. Wahl, also an attorney, who worked at the same firm. They moved to Baltimore’s Forest Park. After passing the Maryland Bar in 1951, she practiced in her husband’s office.

In 1957 she became an assistant Baltimore City solicitor.

“Very few women just sit home and do housework and wait for their husbands to come home at night,” she said in the 1957 article. Working for the city, she said, gave her greater satisfaction conducting her private practice.

“You feel you are really serving the public,” she said.

Maryland’s acting Gov. Blair Lee named her a judge in the District Court for Baltimore in 1977. At the time, she was the only woman on the District Court bench. She retired in 1989 after sitting on the bench at the Wabash Avenue District Court.

In a memorable 1982 case, she sentenced a intoxicated driver to six years in prison for a hit-and run accident that resulted in the deaths of a mother and her 12-year-old son who were standing on an East Baltimore street corner. In an article in The Sun, Judge Wahl said she hoped to send a “message to the world at large that drunken drivers will be punished.”

Kathleen M. Sweeney, associate judge on the District Court for Maryland for Baltimore City, said Judge Wahl “was a lawyer when women weren’t lawyers. And when I was appointed to the bench, she was welcoming and gracious. She was generous with her time and with her advice. She was kind.”

Judge Sweeney also said: “She had strong ideas about theft. She felt that theft from an employer was a breach of trust. She also said that she could understand people stealing for food if they were hungry. She said she could not understand them stealing lobster and crabmeat.”

In a 1983 Sunday Sun magazine article, Judge Wahl described the District Court as “a people’s court. There’s an intimacy. You’re very close to the litigants. You see them perspire. You see them squirm.”

“It’s instant justice,” she said. “There’s no stopping, a lot of action and you don’t have time to breathe. The paperwork is enormous. There’s a lot of juggling of cases and sometimes I wish I had more time to think.”

She also recalled moments of humor. She said she was once approached by a polite Jamaican defendant who called her “Your Lordship.” A man suing a hospital for the cost of a set of dentures once approached her bench, pulled out his false teeth as evidence that they did not fit him properly.

She was a member of the board of directors of the Maryland State Bar Association and a member of the Baltimore City Bar Association. She served as a member of the board of the Health and Welfare Council of Baltimore as well as the Legal Aid Society.

Her daughter said that Judge Wahl's most memorable moment took place as a newly appointed judge. A man from Dudley Avenue collapsed a few seconds before she was going to acquit him of charges of running a red traffic signal. She stepped down from the bench, and with a bailiff, began giving the man CPR. The man died later in the day, but the judge received a note from the man's wife expressing thanks for her attempts to save him.

Judge Wahl kept a vegetable garden and enjoyed camping and travel. She and her husband took driving trips through New Zealand and Scotland.

A member of Beth El Congregation, she formerly held office in the Baltimore chapter of Hadassah.

Services were held Feb. 5 at Sol Levinson and Brothers.

In addition to her daughter, survivors include a son, Jonathan M. Wahl of Chapel Hill, N.C.; another daughter, Jo Ann W. Weiss of Radnor, Pa.; five grandchildren; and six great-grandchildren. Her husband of 70 years died in 2011.

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