

John C. Eldridge, longtime Maryland Court of Appeals judge, dies



Judge John C. Eldridge retired from the Maryland Court of Appeals in 2003 when he reached the mandatory age of 70, but continued to serve by special appointment for another decade. (BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR / Baltimore Sun File)



By **Frederick N. Rasmussen**
The Baltimore Sun

AUGUST 2, 2018, 5:00 PM

Judge John C. Eldridge, who retired from the Maryland Court of Appeals after a career of nearly three decades, died July 27 at **Anne Arundel Medical Center** from congestive heart failure. The longtime Annapolis resident was 84.

“I can’t say how much I’m going to miss him and the Maryland legal profession is going to miss him,” said Robert M. Bell, chief judge of the Maryland Court of Appeals from 1996 until retiring in 2013. “He loved the law and he loved the court, and everything he did was about advancing the law.”

Judge Bell said he had known Judge Eldridge since 1980, and called him “a giant in the legal profession.”

“He will not be forgotten,” he said. “He was a very good friend. When I heard the news, I was driving my car. I had to pull over.”

Judge Lynne A. Battaglia, an associate judge of the state Court of Appeals from 2001 to 2013, was also a colleague and close friend.

“I think he was the most unusual person that I’ve ever had as a friend,” she said. “Even though he was in his 80s, he was very young in his outlook. He loved photography and gave me my first camera.”

John Cole Eldridge was born in Baltimore, the son of Arthur C. Eldridge, a pharmacist, and Jean K. Eldridge, who worked alongside her husband in the drugstore. He was raised in an apartment above the family’s Edgemere pharmacy.

After graduating from the Gilman School in 1951, he obtained a bachelor’s degree in 1955 from Harvard College. He attended Harvard Law School, then graduated cum laude in 1959 from the University of Maryland School of Law.

From 1959 to 1961, he clerked for Chief Judge Simon E. Sobeloff of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 4th Circuit.

He was admitted to the Maryland Bar in 1960, and from 1961 to 1967 was a trial attorney for the civil appellate section of the U.S. Justice Department. He later served as its assistant chief.

He was in private practice from 1967 until 1969, when he was appointed chief legislative officer for Gov. [Marvin Mandel](#).

“While working for Gov. Mandel, Jack did a lot to shape Maryland law, including implementing the District Court system across the state,” Judge Bell said.

In 1974 he was appointed to the state Court of Appeals by Gov. Mandel, filling the seat of a retiring judge. Some opposed it, including appeals court Judge Wilson K. Barnes, who resigned in protest, telling The Baltimore Sun the governor’s action was “purely a political appointment of a real crony” and that Judge Eldridge was unqualified. The Anne Arundel County bar also opposed the appointment.

“I’m not going to get into any debate over my qualifications. I don’t need to,” Judge Eldridge told The Sun. In 1976 he was required to run for a 15-year court term, and said, “If Judge Barnes wants to come down to Anne Arundel County and run against me, that’s OK.”

During his nearly 30-year tenure in the court, Judge Eldridge’s 899 opinions reflected support for First Amendment rights, the right to a jury trial, human rights and voting rights.

“He was also an incredible supporter of women’s rights — drafting the Maryland Equal Rights Amendment and playing a role in multiple decisions supporting the equality of women,” wrote Christy A. Fisher, an assistant attorney general with the Maryland Transportation Authority, in an email.

Ms. Fisher, who was Judge Eldridge’s last law clerk and worked with him from 2008 to 2014, called him the “father of Maryland Administrative Law,” and said he had an “encyclopedic knowledge” when it came to research and writing decisions.

“He would say regarding a case book, ‘Get volume 243 and go to page 245,’ and there was the legal explanation,” she said. “He’d follow the law all the way back and read all of the precedents. He wanted to see how the law was created. It was very holistic and put the law in a greater context.”

“He was unbelievable, and had an incredibly brilliant mind,” Judge Battaglia said.

In the courtroom, Judge Eldridge “did not suffer fools gladly,” Judge Bell said. “He just wanted lawyers to do the job they were hired to do. For instance, if a lawyer missed an appeal ability, Jack wanted to know why. He wanted them to do the very best job they could do representing their clients.”

“He was always prepared, knew a case from the top to the bottom and could tenaciously question lawyers,” he added. “And if they went on too long arguing or got into an argument with Jack, they weren’t going to win.”

“In oral arguments, he wouldn’t accept fudging,” said Ms. Fisher. “But he was very warm person and accepting of everyone. He would take time with people. I was a year out of law school and didn’t know a lot about Maryland law, but he taught me Maryland law. He gave me lots of advice.

“One of the things I will miss the most is being able to pick up the phone and have an answer to any legal question almost instantly,” she said. “He generally disavowed the use of computers, but it was because he knew case law in a way that you couldn’t search a computer.”

Judge Battaglia agreed, saying: “If ever I had a legal question and called him, he’d put down whatever he was doing and help me. He was never unwilling to offer a legal opinion when we talked.”

In a 2003 article, The Sun wrote that during his career, Judge Eldridge wrote “high-profile opinions striking down juvenile curfews laws, ruling that the governor’s phone and office appointment records were public record and declaring that white people cannot be excluded from juries based on race.”

His opinion enabling victims of gun violence to sue those who make or market inexpensive guns called Saturday Night specials was the first in the nation.

For all his tenacity in the court room, Judge Eldridge was “intensely shy and private,” Ms. Fisher said. “However, he was an amazing mentor, adviser and raconteur if you got to know him.”

Judge Battaglia said he accepted women as equals, though he came from a background when that wasn’t always the case.

“He never looked at me as anything less than an equal,” she said.

Judge Eldridge retired in 2003 when he reached the mandatory age of 70, but continued to serve by special appointment for another decade.

Ms. Fisher said he earned the historic distinction of having been the longest serving Maryland Court of Appeals judge. She also noted that he was honored by the Maryland State Bar Association Administrative Law Section with its Hardwicke Award for leadership.

“I’d always ended my conversations with him by saying, ‘I love you,’” Judge Battaglia said. “He was truly more than a colleague. I was so blessed to have known him. He added so much to my life.”

Judge Eldridge enjoyed swimming, fishing and boating, and was a member of the Annapolis Yacht Club for 50 years.

He liked reading mysteries, gardening and walking on the beach at Daytona, Fla. He also enjoyed photography, collecting classic and silent movies, and playing the piano. He was a Baltimore Colts, Orioles and Ravens fan.

His wife of nearly 56 years, the former Dayne Shannon Worsham, died in 2017.

Family and friends will be received from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. and 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Saturday at the John M. Taylor Funeral Home, 147 Duke of Gloucester St., Annapolis.

He is survived by son John C. Eldridge Jr. of Seaford, Del.; daughter Kathryn E. Kuethe of Severna Park; a brother, Richard C. Eldridge of Pine Bush, N.Y.; and two grandsons.

fred.rasmussen@baltsun.com

Copyright © 2018, The Baltimore Sun, a Baltimore Sun Media Group publication | Place an Ad

This article is related to: [Marvin Mandel](#), [Anne Arundel Medical Center](#)