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## Judge Robert L. Karwacki, city school board president

Maryland Court of Appeals judge had led the school board in the early 1970s and helped appoint the first black school superintendent

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Judge Robert L. Karwacki, 1990 (Barbara Haddock Taylor, Baltimore Sun / December 18, 1990)

By Jacques Kelly, The Baltimore Sun

4:46 p.m. EDT, June 11, 2014

Robert L. Karwacki, a retired Maryland Court of Appeals judge who was president of the Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners during the troubled early 1970s, died of kidney failure Monday at his Chester home. The former **Mount Vernon** resident was 80.

He was named head of the city's school board in 1970 and assisted in the appointment of Baltimore's first African-American schools superintendent.

"Brown v. the Board was years earlier; Bob was a master in maintaining educational stability," said former Baltimore Mayor Thomas J. D'Alesandro III, who named him to the school post. "He was fair-minded in integration and a great lawyer."

Born in Baltimore, he was the son of Lee Daniel Karwacki,

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an attorney, and the former Marie Budzynski, a homemaker. Raised in Graceland Park near **Dundalk**, he was a 1950 Mount St. Joseph High School graduate.

He earned a bachelor's degree at the **University of Maryland, College Park**. After graduating from the University of Maryland School of Law, he was admitted to the Maryland bar in 1956.

He joined the law firm of Miles & Stockbridge in 1957 and rose to partner.

"Bob is remembered with great affection as a consummate lawyer and outstanding litigator," said John B. Frisch, chairman of Miles & Stockbridge. "One of the most significant partners in the firm's history, his practice was fast-paced, and he was instrumental in the expansion of our litigation practice. He was a true gentlemen and had a wry sense of humor. He also enjoyed playing the piano for colleagues at firm events."

Judge Karwacki's name appeared in numerous news articles after he was named president of the city school board following the resignation of another Baltimore attorney, Francis D. Murnaghan Jr.

"The new school board president thus stepped into a very ticklish situation made even more ticklish by the fact that many had expected a Negro to be named to head a board that oversees a school system that is two-thirds black," said a 1970 Baltimore Sun article.

Shortly after Judge Karwacki was named board president, Thomas Sheldon resigned as school superintendent in January 1971. Two fellow members of the school board also resigned at that time.

Judge Karwacki cast his vote with the majority on the board to hire Roland N. Patterson, an African-American assistant schools superintendent from Seattle, who was the city's first black schools chief. The vote was cast July 16, 1971.

When he left the school board presidency after 21 months, he said he had never missed a board meeting and had worked an average of 16 hours a week on school business.

"Quite frankly, things were in a state of disaster," he said in a 1971 Sun article. "The atmosphere was so tense you could cut it with a knife. It wasn't only acrimony. It was hatred."

Judge Karwacki had also been an assistant attorney general and in 1973 was named a judge on the Circuit Court for Baltimore City, then known as the Supreme Bench. He was the court's administrative judge from 1978 to 1984.

He then became an associate judge of the Court of Special Appeals and held the post from 1984 to 1990.

He was appointed to the state's highest court in 1990 by then-Gov. William Donald Schaefer.

In 1997, Judge Karwacki wrote a 59-page opinion upholding a death sentence against Flint Gregory Hunt, who was convicted of killing city police officer Vincent Adolfo.

That year he retired and then resumed hearing trials as a retired judge.

"Bob was an outstanding judge. He combined legal scholarship with common sense and the practicality that is born of having tried cases as an advocate. Bob also did not hesitate in taking on tough jobs in public life and within the judiciary," said Judge Lawrence Rodowsky, a fellow Court of Appeals retired judge who lives in Silver Spring.

In addition to his school board service, he served on the Henderson Commission, which revised the state's testamentary laws, from 1965 to 1969 and was chair in 1975 of the Juvenile Justice Commission.

"Bob was a fine trial judge. He tended to speak in short sentences, and he got to the point," said a friend and fellow Miles & Stockbridge partner, James Garland. "He also had a smile and a chuckle that could knock you off your feet."

A member of the Lawyers Roundtable of Baltimore and the Wednesday Law Club, he was an instructor at the University of Maryland School of Law, a Fellow of the Maryland Bar Foundation and a recipient of A Man for All Seasons award of the St. Thomas More Society of Maryland.

"He loved his family, his extended family of many friends, and his fraternity of former law clerks, as well as golf, the Chesapeake Bay, blue water, Betterton and Santa Rosa Beach," said his daughter, Ann Karwacki Goodman of Centreville.

A memorial Mass will be held at 1 p.m. Tuesday at St. Christopher's Roman Catholic Church, 1861 Harbor Drive, Chester.

In addition to his daughter, survivors include his wife of 41 years, the former Marion Elizabeth Harper; two sons, L. Daniel Karwacki of Edgemere and John Robert Karwacki of **Fort Lauderdale**, Fla.; a sister, Mary Jo Martin of Baltimore; and eight grandchildren. His first wife, Patricia Deal Karwacki, died in 1972.

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