

The Sun

District Court's 1st chief dies; Judge Robert Sweeney oversaw new system, opposed corruption

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July 18, 1999 Page(s): 1B

Edition: FINAL

Section: LOCAL

Length: 1336 words

Index Terms:

OBITUARY

MARYLAND

Record Number: 9907180030

Retired Maryland Judge Robert F. Sweeney, who oversaw the creation of the state's highly regarded District Court system to replace a corruption-riddled patchwork of local courts, died of leukemia yesterday at Greater Baltimore Medical Center.

Judge Sweeney, who was 72, was the first and only chief judge of the District Court system from its creation in 1971 until his mandatory retirement three years ago.

A politically adept jurist who succeeded with a combination of charm and determination, he has been credited with leading the modernization of a court system that had been overseen by politically minded, and at times corrupt, judges, magistrates and justices of the peace.

"It was probably the most inspiring of all the judicial reforms effected over the last century or so," said retired Court of Appeals Chief Judge Robert C. Murphy, a friend of Mr. Sweeney's since high school.

Gov. Parris N. Glendening called Judge Sweeney "a true friend of justice."

"In 1971, when Judge Sweeney took over as the first chief judge of the newly created District Court, he said he wanted to make it a court of integrity, a court of true justice and a court of dignity," Gov. Glendening said in a statement. "He was a dedicated leader who made that true."

Former Gov. Marvin Mandel created the District Court system as a reform measure and persuaded Sweeney to run it. In the early days, the system's courtrooms were set up in a variety of unlikely places, such as old garages and former convenience stores.

Judge Sweeney pushed the legislature for an ambitious spending plan to build courthouses and add judges to the system. Under five governors, he pushed for the appointment of qualified judges, and those who weren't performing were summoned for lectures.

Eventually, remnants of the old, highly politicized lower-court system disappeared.

"There were judges who were racists, who had alcohol problems, who were wife-beaters and who thought they had found the greatest 10-to-2 job in the world," Judge Sweeney said in an interview when he retired. "I outlived the bastards, the whole collection of them."

By the time he left the chief judgeship, the District Court system had grown to 1,300 employees, including 99 judges, in 35 courthouses statewide.

With more than 2.4 million cases filed annually -- ranging from traffic tickets to relatively minor criminal and civil matters -- the District Court is the place where most Marylanders get their only firsthand glimpse of the state's judicial system.

"Bob's probably affected the everyday experience of Marylanders in the courtroom more than any person in this century," said former state Del. Timothy F. Maloney, who headed a subcommittee that oversaw the judiciary budget.

Retired, but working

Under state law, Judge Sweeney was forced to retire when he reached age 70. Both he and Judge Murphy objected to the mandatory retirement provision and the General Assembly in 1994 passed a constitutional amendment undoing it. The voters, however, rejected the constitutional change that year, leaving the retirement age at 70.

But his retirement as the system's chief judge gave Judge Sweeney the opportunity for the first time to spend an extended amount of time presiding over District Court cases as a fill-in judge.

On many occasions, he would exceed the number of days a fill-in judge can work, but would keep hearing cases as an unpaid volunteer.

Even when his health faltered, he continued to preside in court, often taking a nap on an office couch after clearing his morning docket to regain energy for the afternoon session, according to his successor as chief judge, Martha F. Rasin.

"He was the embodiment of the District Court," Judge Rasin said. "He lived it and breathed it."

Last fall, the state honored Judge Sweeney by naming the new Annapolis District Court for him.

Robert Francis Sweeney was born in Baltimore on Sept. 17, 1926, the middle child in a seven-child Irish-Catholic family.

He liked to joke about his checkered educational career. He dropped out of Loyola High School and joined the Navy during World War II. After a two-year hitch, he attended Loyola College but dropped out again.

He returned to college and went on to graduate from University of Baltimore law school while working for Crown Central Petroleum

Corp. In 1953, he married the former Elizabeth Lee Andrews. She died in 1996.

Thanks to his work on behalf of a Northeast Baltimore Democratic political organization, Judge Sweeney landed an appointment to a magistrate's seat on the old Baltimore Housing Court in 1959.

He was known for his sharp criticism of slumlords, but he also established a series of courses to instruct people who appeared in his court on being better tenants.

In 1961, Judge Sweeney went to work for the Maryland attorney general's office, eventually rising to the No. 2 post under his longtime friend, Robert Murphy.

As the state's top legal officers, the two appeared before the U.S. Supreme Court to defend Maryland laws that were under challenge by civil rights activists. The court ruled against the state several times.

"We were in the position of trying to defend something that was indefensible," Judge Murphy said. "Mostly we lost. It didn't hurt our feelings."

A new challenge

In 1971, then-Gov. Mandel talked Judge Sweeney into passing up an offer for a federal judgeship to become chief judge of the newly created District Court.

"This court was going to take more than just legal ability," Mr. Mandel said of his pick. "It would take the ability to work with people and to organize. It seemed to me he had those talents. He could laugh and joke, but at the same time be strong-willed and controlling."

Judge Sweeney was an avid golfer and served on the board of the Maryland Catholic Conference.

He was a sought-after speaker, thanks to his superb sense of humor. He estimated that he gave more than 500 speeches over a 10-year period.

Judge Sweeney was an enthusiastic practical joker, as well. Over a two-year period, he sent Judge Murphy a series of ghost-written letters from "Mrs. Bessie Williams" of Shady Side, protesting the new bronze relief of a bare-breasted Lady Justice in the lobby of the Courts of Appeal building in Annapolis.

"I think it's terrible that tax money should be used by seven dirty old men [the court's judges] to put up that sinful structure," the first letter to Judge Murphy read.

After two years of the prank, and with Judge Murphy thoroughly rattled by the letters, Judge Sweeney confessed.

A devoted grandfather, Judge Sweeney quietly slipped photographs of his grandchildren into several cornerstones of district courthouses built around the state, Mr. Maloney said. He once brought two grandsons to the legislative office buildings to protest -- complete with hand-lettered placards -- against a proposed cut in his court system's budget.

About 20 years ago, he attended community college classes to learn automobile body work, and he and his son, Robert F. Sweeney Jr., restored a 1931 Ford Model A and a steel-blue MG convertible.

A Mass of Christian burial will be offered at noon Tuesday at St. Mary of the Assumption Roman Catholic Church, 5500 York Road in Govans. Burial will follow at the church cemetery.

Survivors include his son, who lives in Baltimore, and a daughter, Mary Elizabeth Weigel, of Burr Ridge, Ill.; three brothers, John J., James and William Sweeney, all of Baltimore; three sisters, Mary Elizabeth Sweeney, Margaret Ryan and Patricia Wolfe, all of Baltimore; and six grandchildren.

Graphics:

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Caption:

Robert F. Sweeney was the first chief judge of Maryland's District Court system.

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