

Former state Supreme Court chief justice dies at 89, remembered as 'class act'



Judge Vernon Pearson. The News Tribune file photo dated January 7, 1982. (BRUCE KELLMAN/Staff photographer)

Vernon Robert Pearson won his first case as an attorney without saying a word, which his family jokes was fitting for a man who was deeply thoughtful with his work. The former chief justice of the Washington State Supreme Court died Feb. 4 at the age of 89.

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Vernon Robert Pearson won his first case as an attorney without saying a word, which his family jokes was fitting for a man who was deeply thoughtful with his work.

The former chief justice of the Washington State Supreme Court died Feb. 4 at the age of 89. He died from complications after hip surgery, while suffering with congenital heart disease, his family said.

Pearson joined the state Court of Appeals, Division II, when it was created in 1969, and was appointed by Gov. John Spellman to the state Supreme Court in 1981, where he served until 1989.

He enlisted in the Navy after the attack on Pearl Harbor, and became interested in law while serving as his ship's prosecuting attorney.

He eventually earned a law degree from the University of Michigan. Before becoming a judge, he worked at his brother Claude's law firm in Tacoma, and was in private practice for 17 years.

Pearson's first assignment as an attorney was to defend a Norwegian immigrant accused of driving under the influence shortly before he was to become a U.S. citizen.

When asked whether he had any prior convictions, the man said he'd been found guilty overseas of helping Jewish people escape persecution during World War II.

"The judge asked for a Bible, they threw out the case, and he was sworn in as a U.S. citizen on the spot," said Pearson's daughter, Kathy Oliver. "My dad won the case without saying a word."

Pearson's survivors include his other children, Robert, Stephen, David, and his brother Claude.

Oliver said her father was a mediator within his family as well as on the bench.

During his career and in retirement, Pearson worked on jurisdictional issues between tribal courts and other judicial systems.

As a Supreme Court justice, he was instrumental in instituting a court rule that says tribal court judgments "will be given full faith and credit" in Washington courts, said former Supreme Court Chief Justice Gerry Alexander.

He and Pearson are the only judges to serve on both the Division II Court of Appeals and the state Supreme Court, Alexander said, though they didn't serve together.

"He was just a class act," Alexander recalled.

Pearson mentored young legal professionals, and once let a legal clerk in between homes live in the family cabin on his Gig Harbor property.

One lawyer he mentored was Bertil Johnson, whom he recruited in 1967 to join the Tacoma firm that now is called Davies Pearson.

“Vernon was what I would call a lawyer’s lawyer,” Johnson said. “I do not recall ever seeing him get mad or upset. He was a gentleman. He was just one of those people who got people together and got things done.”

He remembers Pearson as an influential colleague and friend who would sing in the office.

The love of Pearson’s life was his wife, Jean, who died in 1995.

He proposed after their first date when he returned from his naval service. After 16 proposals and several months, she said yes, said Oliver.

They built their retirement home in Gig Harbor overlooking Henderson Bay after he retired from the court.

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