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Murray Guterson, revered defense attorney, dies at 83

In a career spanning more than 50 years, Murray Guterson won and lost hard-fought cases but always emerged a gentleman who kept his word.

By Steve Miletich

Seattle Times staff reporter



Murray Guterson was the type of attorney who preferred long, yellow legal pads and 3-by-5 index cards. The closest he came to accepting technology was a primitive Dictaphone.

Old school and old Seattle, his favorite fictional character emerged during the era Mr. Guterson began to make his name in the law — Atticus Finch, the moral hero and model of lawyerly integrity in the 1960 novel “To Kill a Mockingbird.”

“Murray Guterson was a real-life Atticus Finch, the archetypal dedicated criminal defense attorney who remained at all times a consummate gentleman,” said King County Superior Court Judge William Downing. “He embodied professional integrity and his word was his bond. It was with nothing short of reverence that all of us young lawyers in the 1970s and ’80s viewed him. That hasn’t changed.”

Mr. Guterson, one of Seattle’s most distinguished and beloved criminal defense attorneys, died Friday at 83, surrounded by his family, after a battle with Alzheimer’s.

“He was a giant; he really was,” said Seattle attorney Pete Vial, who in 1975 went to work for Mr. Guterson at the legendary Seattle law firm Culp, Dwyer, Guterson & Grader.

Mr. Guterson practiced at the firm, which disbanded in 1995, and its successor, McNaul Ebel Nawrot & Helgren, for more than 50 years. He arrived early at the office, grabbing the sports page others would have to go searching for, and at midmorning took his own box of cereal to a lower-level cafe to buy some milk, coffee and maybe a sweet roll.

“He was real,” said younger brother Lewis Guterson, 79, of Bellevue, also an attorney.

Murray Bernard Guterson was born in Seattle on Dec. 17, 1929. He attended Roosevelt High School in the 1940s and excelled at basketball, developing a flat shot from the corner of the gym to avoid hitting an overhead track that ringed the court.

After attending the University of Washington as an undergraduate and a law student, Mr. Guterson served as a King County deputy prosecutor and an assistant United States attorney in Seattle.

In 1958, he joined a budding firm started by his former law-school classmates, William Dwyer, who as an attorney and federal judge became a towering figure in Northwest law, and Gordon Culp, a future University of Washington regent.

They were later joined by George Grader, now the last living member from the nameplate of the firm, who on Tuesday recalled Guterson's laughter, jokes, flamboyance, speaking ability and ubiquitous suspenders.

"It's a corny phrase, I know; he loved the law and the law loved him," said Grader, 85.

At age 30, Mr. Guterson burst into the headlines during a 1960 murder trial in which he and his co-counsel presented no testimony on behalf of a rug cleaner charged in the slaying and robbery of a Ballard grocer. Mr. Guterson, working as a court-appointed attorney, instead gave a two-hour closing argument attacking the testimony of key witnesses.

When the jury acquitted the defendant, the judge told him, "If you had a million dollars you could not have bought the defense you got in this case for free."

The front-page headline in the March 30, 1960, Seattle Times read: "Attorney Hugged By Defendant."

Over the years, Mr. Guterson vigorously represented a host of clients, big and small, winning some cases and losing others. Even if convicted, clients benefitted from his ability to obtain a reduced charge or a lighter sentence.

As portrayed in "To Kill a Mockingbird," Mr. Guterson believed in the good and redemptive side of people, said his son, John Guterson.

"That's the way my dad approached everybody," he said, his voice cracking.

Mr. Guterson took pride in his family and was "a dad first and foremost," said Vial, now of McNaul Ebel.

Vial recalled that Mr. Guterson and a fellow attorney, David Gossard, would despair over the financial prospects of their "artistic offspring" sons. They were talking about David Guterson, the now-acclaimed Bainbridge Island author who wrote "Snow Falling on Cedars," and eventual Pearl Jam guitarist Stone Gossard.

Besides sons John and David, Mr. Guterson is survived by his wife of 62 years, Shirley, daughters Chana and Mary and another son, Benjamin.

All five of his children spoke Sunday at their father's service at the Bikur Cholim Cemetery in Seattle. The family has asked that donations be made to Kline Galland, which provides services to Jewish seniors in Greater Seattle, or the Hillel Jewish student program at the University of Washington.

David Guterson recalled on Tuesday the time police with a metal detector came to the family's North Seattle home because of a bomb threat related to his father's defense of a client accused of spying for the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In addition, a neighbor suggested that it might be best if the Gutersons were to move out, and the phone kept ringing with people who wanted his father's head.

Through it all, his father remained calm and just went back to reading the newspaper.

“I really thought he was great,” David Guterson said. “He struck me as heroic in that time.”

Mr. Guterson, who liked to act on stage, participated in a production of “The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial” at Intiman in the late 1980s.

Judge Downing recalled playing the part of a witness and Mr. Guterson a defense attorney. “Our lines were all scripted by Herman Wouk and yet I found myself feeling I was putty in Murray’s hands,” Downing said.

Mr. Guterson generously mentored young lawyers, providing helpful tidbits on the county’s Superior Court judges because he knew their traits so well, Vial said.

“He was unfailingly humble, fair and forthright,” Vial said.

As his health deteriorated in recent years, Mr. Guterson’s memory faded.

Within the last year, Vial said, he, Grader and another lawyer bought lunches and went to visit Mr. Guterson at his longtime home.

There was Mr. Guterson, holding a 3-by-5 card with their names written on it by his wife, so he could remember.

“It was poignant and touching and purely Murray,” Vial said.

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