

## **In Memoriam**



### **Judge John J. Connelly**

**August 11, 1926 • June 11, 2018**

**Judicial Conference  
Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals  
2018**

**IN MEMORIAM**

**of**

**THE HONORABLE JOHN J. CONNELLY**

**Retired United States Bankruptcy Judge,  
District of Minnesota and Southern District of New York**

*Presented by:*

**The Honorable Robert J. Kressel,  
United States Bankruptcy Judge, District of Minnesota**

**We, the bench and bar of the Eighth Circuit, gathered at the 2018 Judicial Conference, hereby honor our former colleague, retired Judge John J. Connelly, and take notice with sorrow his death on June 11, 2018 at the age of 91.**

**Judge Connelly was appointed a referee in bankruptcy for the District of Minnesota in 1965, became a bankruptcy judge in 1973, and retired from the bench in Minnesota in 1986. At the time of his retirement, he was serving as the court's first chief judge. In 1995, after practicing law for a few years, Judge Connelly was recalled by the Eighth Circuit Judicial Council and designated to sit in the Southern District of New York, where he served until 2002.**

**Judge Connelly was the son of two Irish immigrants; losing his mother at age 2. Bucking a common practice of the time, Judge Connelly's father kept John and his four siblings together and raised them on his own. Judge Connelly grew up in a tiny neighborhood of St. Paul which was remarkably diverse for that city. His neighbors were Irish, African Americans, Swedes, Czechs, Hungarians, Italians, and Germans, all living, working, playing and scraping by together. Judge Connelly carried this part of his early life with him all of his life and treated everyone—Supreme Court Justices and clerks, tradesmen and billionaires, farmers and factory owners with the same respect.**

**He graduated from Washington High School in St. Paul where he played hockey, football, and baseball. After graduating from high school in 1944, he enlisted in the Navy, serving on the USS**

**Siboney in the Pacific through the end of World War II. Returning home after the war, Judge Connelly suffered some hearing loss resulting from an explosion on his ship. After the war, he attended first Hamline University and then was recruited to play hockey by the University of Minnesota. He got his bachelors degree in 1949 and his law degree from the University of Notre Dame in 1953. Even as a young lawyer, with a family to feed, Judge Connelly supplemented his income driving trucks and doing other work. He was neither embarrassed or felt demeaned by such work, believing that all honest work is honorable, with inherent dignity.**

**Judge Connelly was in private practice until 1959 with the law firms of Felhaber, Larson & Fenlon and Bundlie, Kelly & Torrisson and as an Assistant United States Attorney from 1959 until 1965.**

**In 1965, Judge Connelly received a phone call from the Chief Judge of the United States District Court asking him if he was interested in being appointed a bankruptcy referee. He said yes and thus began his judicial career. His family talks about Judge Connelly's four retirements. He retired from the Minnesota Bankruptcy Court in 1986—becoming a partner in the Minneapolis law firm of Linquist & Venum. He retired from Lindquist & Venum in 1994, to begin his service in the Southern District of New York, in White Plains, New York from which he retired in 2002. After his retirement from the New York Bankruptcy Court, he continued to work as a mediator in bankruptcy cases—eventually retiring from that work, his fourth retirement.**

**John was interested in sports all of his life. He played sports in college, followed them afterwards, and coached his children's' teams—coaching both hockey and football always emphasizing sportsmanship as well as technical skills.**

**To say that John loved being Irish would be an understatement. Growing up as the son of Irish immigrants, he was well inculcated with a love of all things Irish. He helped start the St. Patrick's Day Association in St. Paul and eventually being honored as Mr. Pat in 1987. He was something of an anomaly however; a St. Paul Irish Catholic *Republican*. His only explanation for his affiliation with the Republican party was that his father left Ireland as a Republican and himself grew up a Republican in St. Paul, so**

members of his father's family were also Republicans. After designating Judge Connelly as the first chief judge of the bankruptcy court, Chief U.S. District Judge Miles W. Lord bemoaned: "I cannot believe I appointed a Republican."

Later in life, Judge Connelly had a rose garden in the backyard of his home the Highland Park neighborhood of St. Paul. He was not fond of air travel, but still managed to fit in vacations in Mexico, Hawaii, cruises in the Caribbean and through the Panama Canal and, of course, visits to Ireland. Judge Connelly was a soft spoken, gentle man, kind, and considerate. At Judge Connelly's funeral, his son Tom mentioned that no one in the family could ever remember hearing his father curse or even raise his voice in anger. Judge Connelly was deeply devoted to his Catholic faith. It was not something he talked a lot about; he simply lived it and shared it with his family. His young children all observed their father in the evening praying the rosary—something which Judge Connelly's wife, Mary, and their children shared with him in the latter days of his life. During his life, he frequently attended mass in the morning at Assumption Catholic Church in downtown St. Paul before going to work.

Judge Connelly is survived by his wife of nearly 64 years, Mary Louise Connelly, nee Bigelow, and seven children: Thomas, Kathleen, John, Timothy, Michael, Brian, , Maureen Kirk, and ten grandchildren: Caitlin, Patrick, Megan, Sean, Stephanie, John, Julia, Daniel, Anthony, and Elizabeth.

Judge Connelly is missed not only by his family, but by all of us who knew him or worked with him.

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*The following biographical sketch was prepared by the family of Judge Connelly for his funeral.*

**Born to Thomas J. Connelly (County Mayo, Ireland) and Kathleen Connelly (nee Guilfoyle, County Clare, Ireland), third of four children, Thomas Connelly, Mary Kunz, and Anthony Connelly all now deceased.**

**Survived by beloved spouse of almost 64 years, Mary Louise Connelly (nee Bigelow, married 1954, Grandma Cookie) and seven children: Thomas (Shauna), Kathleen (Carolyn Sampson), John, Timothy (Leslie), Michael (Norma Villa), Brian (Susan), Maureen Kirk (James), and grandchildren Caitlin, Patrick, Megan, Sean, Stephanie, John, Julia, Daniel, Anthony, and Elizabeth.**

**John's mother died when he was 2, and his father kept all the children together, never remarrying. John was raised by a loving man who was mother and father to him, with other relatives and friends providing extra care and attention. He and his siblings grew up playing in Como Park, shagging golf balls, roaring back at the lions, and warming up in the glass house. Their childhood home was the old St. Andrew mission church, converted by their dad into the only home John would have until he went to war. His dad's sadness at having left behind his family in Ireland when he immigrated to the United States instilled a fierce love of family in John, which he passed on to his children. The children's other playgrounds included the coal piles at the old NSP plant where their dad worked and the railroad yards. The family lived close to the railroad tracks, and their tiny neighborhood was remarkably diverse for St. Paul, with Irish, African Americans, Swedes, Czechs, Hungarians, Italians and Germans, all living, working, playing and scraping by together. John never held himself above anyone else, and treated everyone - Supreme Court Justices and clerks, tradesmen and billionaires, farmers and factory owners - with the same respect.**

**John grew up in and loved the Como Park area of St. Paul. He graduated from Washington High School, where he played hockey, football, and baseball. In 1944 John enlisted in the Navy and served proudly on the escort carrier USS Siboney in the Pacific theater, including Leyte Gulf, through the end of WWII.**

**Returning home after the war, he attended Hamline University, and was recruited away by the University of Minnesota to play hockey. He graduated from the U. of M. with a degree in economics and earned a law degree at the University of Notre Dame Law School, planning to practice labor law in honor of his father, who helped**

**unionize NSP. John was admitted to the Minnesota Bar in 1953. During this time he was starting his family as well as his law practice, and briefly supplemented his income driving trucks and other work, reflecting his belief that all honest work is honorable, with inherent dignity.**

**John was in private practice until 1959, when he was appointed as an Assistant United States Attorney and served until 1964 when he returned to private practice. As an Assistant US Attorney, his work included traveling to the Arrowhead region for condemnation proceedings related to the creation of the Boundary Water Canoe Area Wilderness. He recognized the value of that work, he also recognized the adverse effects on the people whose land was being taken. He was able to make it possible for some individuals to continue living within the wilderness area after their land was condemned, most notably Dorothy Molter.**

**In 1965 John was appointed as a U.S. bankruptcy referee and was appointed as a judge after the U.S. Bankruptcy Court was created in 1978. He served until 1986 and retired as Minnesota's first Chief Bankruptcy Judge. In 1987, he returned to private practice for a time as a senior partner with Lindquist and Vennum, retiring from private practice in 1994 to take an appointment to serve as a bankruptcy judge in the Southern District of New York. He and Mary commuted between the Twin Cities and White Plains, New York through 2002, when he resigned from the bench. After this he continued to work as a mediator in complex bankruptcy cases, eventually retiring, for the fourth time.**

**John taught bankruptcy law at the University of Minnesota as an adjunct professor and was one of the original board members at the founding of the University of St. Thomas School of Law.**

**John was an early adopter of new technologies before that term existed. A war injury that impaired his hearing coupled with his training as an electrician in the Navy prompted his interest in innovative audio equipment, and he frequently brought home equipment on which he would play all types of music, including Liszt, Rodgers and Hammerstein, the Clancy Brothers, the Sons of the Pioneers, Puccini and Enya. That interest in technology continued, with John using computers, iPads and cell phones as skillfully as his grandkids.**

**His love of the land and nature was shared with his family during family road trips out West, vacations to the Arrowhead and Central**

**Minnesota, and in the extraordinary back yard of the beautiful home on Ridge Street that he and Mary made for their family. When Mary and John purchased that home, it included a rose garden that became John's special hobby. Each year, John cut the first bloom and the last bloom in his rose gardens and gave them to Mary.**

**John loved most sports and played them with passion and physical grace. His prowess helped pay his way through school. When his children started to play sports, John gave countless hours coaching hockey and football, teaching sportsmanship as well as technical skills.**

**Interested in all things Irish and St. Paul, John was involved in the beginnings of the Saint Patrick's Day Association in 1967 and was honored as Mr. Pat in 1987. John attended the annual St. Paul St. Patrick's Day parades and associated festivities, well into his 80s. He convened an extended Connelly family St. Patrick's gathering each year at Mancini's, including 2018, reinforcing the love of family and their Irish heritage. John's travels to Ireland reunited him with his father's and mother's families who still work the farms where John's parents were born. He felt like he was coming home in Ireland, and was able to enjoy sharing it with some of his children on several memorable trips. Those trips to his relatives' farms in Ireland fueled his understanding and compassion in his bankruptcy court during the Farm Crisis of the 1980's, in cases where he fairly and carefully balanced the interests of debtor family farmers and creditor banks.**

**John's travels included trips to Mexico and Hawaii, cruises in the Caribbean and the Panama Canal, camping and hunting trips, visits to Europe and cherished stays in New York. He never returned to Asia after the war, but had lasting memories of Hong Kong and Japan, the land and the people. When negotiating for the purchase of a silk blouse for his sister Mary, a skeptical clerk was at last convinced and moved by the boy's filial love and sincerity when he selected the most modest blouse on offer. John had charmed the shopkeeper, his enemy until just weeks before, by simply being himself.**

**His Catholic faith was as central to John as was his love for his wife and children. His children all remember from their earliest years, their dad kneeling by his bedside and saying his evening prayers, his head bowed over his rosary. One of his and his**

family's most cherished memories was the family Mass celebrated by Father John Malone in their home last autumn. Weekly Mass, spiritual retreats, and daily prayers were only the visible signs of a rich interior spiritual life that guided all of his life decisions. In recent years, he and Mary each night would say the rosary together between 8:30 and 9. On his last night with us, his family gathered at his bedside to say the rosary with him.

John will be deeply missed by his family, friends and colleagues. John's family would like to extend special thanks to Our Lady of Peace Hospice, and especially Cathy Kramer, for the many months of supportive and loving care that made it possible for John to stay at home with Mary.

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**An obituary of Judge Connelly in the  
*Minneapolis Star Tribune* by Erin Adler  
on June 26, 2018, stated in part:**

**As Minnesota's first chief bankruptcy judge, John Connelly didn't just deal with money issues. He used his calm demeanor and sense of empathy to make decisions that affected people's lives.**

**During the farm crisis in the 1980s, Connelly tried to balance the rights of banks and farmers, giving families the chance to restructure their finances and keep their property if possible**

...

**Family and colleagues said that Connelly's patience and big heart extended outside the courtroom, where they said he would talk to the doorman just as he would a wealthy client. "You never felt rushed and you didn't need status to rank in his books, [a former law partner, James] Lodoen said. "John gave others the most important gift—the gift of time."**

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## Acknowledgments

**The Minnesota Legal History Project thanks the family of Judge Connelly for permission to post the biographical sketch they prepared for his funeral. And it is indebted to Judge Kressel for his tribute to the Judge delivered at the 2018 Eighth Circuit Judicial Conference.**

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