

Profiles in Judicial Leadership: *The Honorable Joseph Edward Stevens, Jr.*

By Kendall Foley



Hon. Joseph Edward
Stevens, Jr. in 1981

“He lived life well and we shall remember it as being exemplary.”¹ Those who knew Judge Joseph Stevens unanimously agree that he was a unique, memorable man who brought concerted value to the people and the world around him. Judge Stevens is remembered professionally as being smart, firm, controlled, and precise. He is remembered personally as being a warm and treasured companion, with an endless devotion to service to others.

Joseph Edward Stevens, Jr. was born in Kansas City, Missouri in 1928. He was raised in a strongly religious family, an influence that would continue to govern his “attitudes and demeanor” throughout his entire life. After attending Southwest High School in Kansas City, he headed for New Haven, Connecticut, to attend Yale University. Judge Stevens earned a Bachelor of Arts from Yale in 1949. Moving from New Haven to Ann Arbor, Judge Stevens attended law school at the University of Michigan and earned his J.D. in 1952.

At the University of Michigan, Judge Stevens was roommates with two other Yale graduates from Kansas City: Neil Lombardi and Glenn Carbaugh. They, along with another Kansas City native, Bert Bates, would become great friends. Judge Stevens had a distinct habit of striking up lasting friendships at every turn. Those who knew him describe his profound care and attention to his relationships with others. Bert Bates would later write, “It was indeed a fortunate circumstance for me to have met him under those conditions and that acquaintanceship, which blossomed into devoted friendship, had a very profound positive impact upon my life and upon the lives of so many others with whom he crossed paths.”

Judge Stevens’s commitment to personal relationships was perhaps best exemplified by his devotion to his family. He met his soon-to-be wife Norma Umlauf, as she was then called, when she was preparing to move into the apartment building Judge Stevens lived in. He once recalled, “[A]t that very time that I went to the lobby and accidentally met her and immediately decided this was the girl I was going to marry. And I did.” He and Norma had two daughters, Jennifer and Rebecca. These women brought him an unparalleled joy; a simple call from any of them would noticeably brighten his demeanor.

Despite his lasting youthful appearance, Judge Stevens is described as having been extremely mature, thoughtful and articulate. He was committed to the highest possible standards

¹ The source material for this article includes the following: W.H. ‘Bert’ Bates, *A Life Worth Living*, 67 UMKC L. REV. 205 (1998); Honorable Ortrise Smith, *My Friend Joe Stevens*, 67 UMKC L. REV. 203 (1998); Speech by Hon. Ike Skelton in the Congressional Record, Vol. 145 (1999); Memorial Service Speech by Dr. Elbert C. Cole at the Central United Methodist Church; *Gold, Silver, Brass, and Iron: The Speeches of the Honorable Joseph E. Stevens, Jr. with Memorials from Friends*, Edited by David T. M. Powell; United States District Courts, Western District of Missouri: About the Charles Evans Whittaker Courthouse; and personal conversations with David Powell, Judge Stevens’s former law clerk from 1993-1995.

in all that he did. In his memorial service, Dr. Elbert C. Cole remarked, “Joe seemed at times driven by excellence, impatient with mediocrity, bothered by awkward language, shoddy thinking or poorly executed anything and everything.” Judge Stevens became particularly interested in communication and the powerful tool of precise, meaningful language. In one of his famously eloquent speeches, he mused:

It is the ability rationally to communicate verbally, both orally and in writing, which distinguishes the human animal from all other forms of life. Notice I said the ability rationally to communicate – in other words to express ideas and to convey information by using the tools of words in a consistent and meaningful way. The ability to think – that’s rationality – and to express your thought in a way that can be generally understood at least by those using the same idiom – is the hallmark of civilized society. The farther we get from the development and practice of that ability, the more we sacrifice – or surrender – the rewards of civilization that are available to us.

Early Career

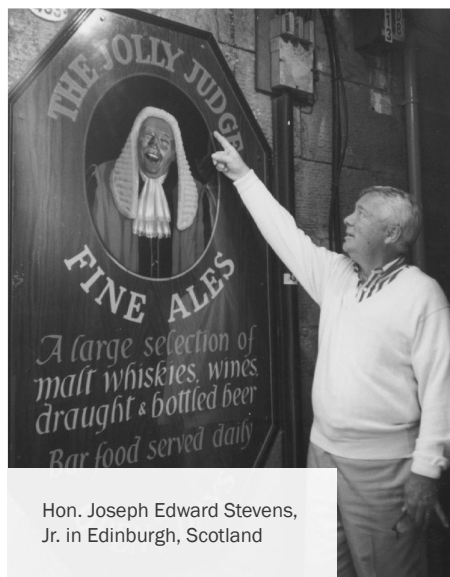
After law school, Judge Stevens briefly served as a research assistant to Judge Charles Evans Whittaker, who would later be appointed to the United States Supreme Court in 1957 by President Eisenhower. Judge Whittaker’s mentorship, through both the judiciary and their shared church, had a profound influence on Judge Stevens. Following his work with Judge Whittaker, Judge Stevens became a U.S. Naval Reserve Lieutenant in 1952. He served active duty from 1952-1955 and remained a part of the Reserve until 1960. Judge Stevens was a Judge Advocate General (JAG) Officer during his time in the Navy. His first commissioned JAG assignment in the Navy was to try cases with the permanent General Court Martial in San Diego.

Following his active duty, Judge Stevens made his way back to Kansas City and the Judge began a successful career in private practice. He started at Lombardi, McLean, Slagle and Bernard in 1956 and later moved to Lathrop, Koontz, Righter, Blackwell, Gordon and Parker, where he became a partner in 1962. Judge Stevens held that role until 1981, when he was appointed to the bench. The strong consensus among those who knew him was that he was a phenomenal trial lawyer, and quickly become known as one of the finest in Kansas City. He received the prestigious Lon O. Hocker Memorial Trial Lawyer Award in 1962. Judge Stevens was well known for

his trial experience and expertise throughout his life. A detail-oriented master of evidence rules, his trial skills were readily apparent in all that he did in the courtroom.

Judicial Career

On July 9, 1981, Judge Stevens was nominated to the federal bench by President Ronald Reagan. He was simultaneously nominated to both the Eastern District and Western District of Missouri and confirmed by the Senate on September 16, 1981. In the original federal courthouse in downtown Kansas City, Judge Stevens occupied Courtroom 1, which had previously been occupied by his mentor, Charles Evans Whittaker. Judge Stevens served as



Chief Judge of the Western District of Missouri from 1992, until he assumed senior status in both the Eastern and Western Districts on July 1, 1998. While on the bench, Judge Stevens also served as an Adjunct Professor of Trial Advocacy at the University of Missouri School of Law and a Judge-in-Residence at UMKC Law School, teaching a seminar in “The Arts of Lawyering and Judging.” He continued to serve under senior status until his death on December 18, 1998. Judge Stevens was succeeded by Judge Nanette Laughery.

Judge Stevens is fondly remembered by those who worked for and with him on the federal bench. A distinct peculiarity about Judge Stevens was that the views of his law clerks rarely matched the politics of the lifelong Republican and Reagan appointee for whom they worked. His wife, Norma, reported that

this was by design. The judge knew his own mind and, confident in his own opinions, he was nevertheless willing and curious enough to broaden his viewpoint by surrounding himself with different perspectives. The judge was always interested in his clerks’ assessment of the motions that the Judge was working on. Such intellectual curiosity and courtesy were not unusual. Judge Stevens often had political disagreements with those around him but was not disagreeable. Many of his great friends marveled that their stout political differences never seem to drive a wedge between them because of the respectfulness with which the Judge always approach their discussions.

Another hallmark of Judge Stevens’s tenure on the bench was his deep respect for juries. At the end of every trial, he would thank the jury for their service with a heartfelt speech, explaining that, since the abandonment of the draft, jury duty is the only compulsory civic duty we have left. He had a special care and relationship with each jury in his courtroom. After one long trial, the jury gifted Judge Stevens with a gavel they had all signed and he always had it on the bench with him after that.

A great judicial career is not complete without some landmark cases. In *Baker v. General Motors*,² remembered for its treatment on appeal,³ Judge Stevens issued sanctions to General Motors for what he had determined were egregious discovery violations. Controversially, the sanctions were reversed by the Eighth Circuit, a decision thought to diminish the power of judges to regulate damaging bad-faith discovery tactics by corporate giants. Judge Stevens also handled some headline cases, including: the famous *Christine Craft* case,⁴ in which a Kansas City broadcast journalist battled the industry through a sexual discrimination suit; and some cases involving an Argentine mob in Kansas City, where rumor has it the mob put a “hit” on Judge Stevens and he was detailed with around-the-clock security.

Community Involvement & Honors

To say that Judge Stevens was a civic-minded man is a gross understatement. It is hardly possible to imagine any person more persistently involved in their community. In one commencement speech, Judge Stevens presented the young graduates with a charge that appropriately reflects his attitudes on the individual’s responsibility to society: “Use the avenues of education and information – use the ballot box – use the impact of political organizations – but it is of utmost importance that

² 3 *Baker v. General Motors Corp.*, 86 F.3d 811 (8th Cir. 1996).

³ See Stephen R. Bough, *Spitting in a Judge’s Face: The 8th Circuit’s Treatment Of Rule 37 Dismissal And Default Discovery Sanctions*, 43 S.D. L. REV. 36 (1998).

⁴ *Craft v. Metromedia, Inc.*, 572 F.Supp. 868 (W.D. Mo. 1983).

you formulate your ideas, keep them free, maintain free access to facts and ideas, and put them to work in the defense of freedom.” Judge Stevens believed in being involved in the community because he believed it was important for judges to be approachable by both lawyers and citizens.

Consistent with that spirit, Judge Stevens was once called for jury service in state court and was adamant about serving. It was suggested to him that he would surely be dismissed due to his position. However, Judge Stevens was resolved to fulfill his duty. When one of his clerks informed him that he was statutorily disqualified from service due to his status as a judge, Judge Stevens called the Chief Justice of the Missouri Supreme Court to confirm for him that he was, in fact, disqualified. Only then did the Judge back down from his determination to show up for jury service.

Some of Judge Stevens’s most impactful involvement was with the Missouri Bar, of which he was a member of the Board of Governors from 1974 to 1982. During his tenure, Judge Stevens recommended adding non-lawyers to the Missouri Bar Disciplinary Committee. This was a controversial recommendation, but it was ultimately passed by the Board of Governors and approved by the Missouri Supreme Court. Judge Stevens served as President of the Missouri Bar from 1980-1981. He was part of the Judicial Conference Advisory Committee and the Judicial Counsel of the Eighth Circuit.

Judge Stevens was intimately involved with the construction of the new federal courthouse. He served as the chairman of the Courthouse Construction Committee for the Western District of Missouri. Judge Ortrie Smith recalls that Judge Stevens was “tireless and irreplaceable in his efforts to get it funded and built.” A sure sign of Judge Stevens’s influence, the new courthouse in downtown Kansas City is named the Charles Evans Whittaker United States Courthouse, after his beloved mentor. The finished courthouse, which took three years and \$90 million to build, is an eleven-story, 595,000 square foot beauty.

Although Judge Stevens ironically expressed some mild distaste for President Truman earlier in his life, his service on the Board of Trustees for the Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation was among his most cherished engagements. He was appointed to the Board by President Clinton and confirmed by the Senate on April 6, 1995. He served as president of the Board from 1997 to 1998. After Judge Stevens passed away, the foundation named an award in his honor for an alumni of the scholarship who had pursued public service.

Judge Stevens was involved in a great number of other organizations. He was a director and member of the Board of Governors of Truman Medical Center from 1981-1998. He was a member of the Advisory Board of the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), the Man-of-the-Month Fraternity from 1996-1998, the Missouri Academy of Squires, the Board of Directors for the University Club from 1994-1997, the Carriage Club, and the Epsilon Lambda Chapter of Beta Theta Pi Fraternity. Judge Stevens was President of the Vanguard Club in 1993 and of the Mercury Club in 1995. Finally, he was a Trustee of the Barstow School. Beyond the thicket of memberships and titles, Judge Stevens had a lesser-known dedication to tutoring illiterate individuals and also volunteered to help with charitable activities so frequently that recounting his service would be impossible.

In addition to his dedication to the community at large, Judge Stevens was also deeply dedicated to his church. He was a member of the Central United Methodist Church practically from the first to the last days of his life. The current church building sits at 52nd and Oak Streets, just across from the UMKC Law School. In photos of the groundbreaking for that building, Judge Stevens can be seen in the front row as a young boy. He sang in the choir for almost 40 years and served in nearly every capacity and on every committee for the church throughout his life, demonstrating his commitment to the church’s wellbeing. Through the church, he was influenced by several mentors, including Charles Whittaker,

William Campbell, and Thomas Mather. At his memorial service, Dr. Cole remembered, “He had a love for this church, its people, its property, its faith, its work. And any faith would not do. It had to be a faith that would offer hope and meaning to people.” Judge Stevens’s faith was integral in his life, as important to him as breathing and eating.

Judge Stevens was often honored and recognized for his accomplishments throughout his life. In addition to his Lon O. Hocker Memorial Trial Lawyer Award, he received the Missouri Bar Association Spurgeon Smithson Award in 1987, the Missouri Bar President’s Award in 1995, the Lawyers Association of Kansas City Charles E. Whitaker Award in 1996, and the William Jewell College William F. Yates Distinguished Service Medallion in 1998.

Conclusion

Judge Stevens lived a big life. He is fondly remembered by those who knew him as a kind and thoughtful man. He held himself to lofty standards, both in the courtroom and in his personal and community endeavors. He approached all that he did, from his work to his relationships, with an impressive care and attention. Judge Stevens’s remarkable life and influence continue to endure. ■

About the Author



Kendall Foley is a 2022 graduate from the University of Missouri - Kansas City School of Law, where she was a legal intern for the Honorable Judge Stephen R. Bough, District Judge for the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Missouri. Ms. Foley is now serving as an Assistant Prosecuting Attorney in Jackson County, Missouri.