



News Release

Superior Court of California

County of San Francisco

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SAN FRANCISCO SUPERIOR COURT MOURNS THE PASSING OF JUDGE 'UNCLE JOE' DESMOND

SAN FRANCISCO -- The Judges and Retired Judges of the San Francisco Superior Court today expressed sadness over the death of retired Judge Joseph Anthony Desmond, a cherished friend and colleague known widely and fondly as "Uncle Joe."

Judge Desmond was appointed to the San Francisco Municipal Court on Jan. 2, 1983, part of Gov. Jerry Brown's "Midnight appointments." A native San Franciscan who loved his City, Judge Desmond, 81, will long be remembered as a gifted raconteur who keenly understood people – a quality that helped him excel on the Bench, according to present and former judicial colleagues.

"Joe was one of the most beloved Judges ever to sit on our Court," said Presiding Judge James J. McBride. "I was fortunate to have him as my mentor Judge. He was a wise and kind man who lived peacefully and acted wisely. He loved his wife, his family, good people, a good story and his orchids. We could all do well to emulate him. He will be sorely missed and not soon forgotten."

A navigator and bombardier for the U.S. Air Force during the Korean War, he earned his JD from the University of San Francisco School of Law, and later became a criminal

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defense attorney. After his judicial appointment in 1983, he thrived as a respected and well-liked Judge who was elevated to the San Francisco Superior Court through consolidation in 1998.

“As a Judge, Joe always knew what the right thing was and he always did the right thing,” said Judge James P. Collins. “A truly great San Franciscan.”

Judge Kathleen Kelly had the distinct pleasure of knowing Judge Desmond because he was her father’s best friend. “I have known ‘the Judge,’ as we called him, my entire life. Everyone who ever met him loved him,” Judge Kelly said. “They loved his warmth, his humor and his deep devotion to his family and his wide circle of friends, many of whom he’s known since his days at St. Monica’s Grammar School. He loved everything Irish and everything San Francisco.”

Judge Lillian K. Sing remembered Judge Desmond’s sunny disposition. “He was always so jovial,” she said. “He always had something good to say about others and he was just wonderful to be around. He made people feel good about themselves – whether they were litigants, Judges or staff.”

A former Presiding Judge of the Municipal Court, Judge Desmond was instrumental in establishing the Bail Commissioner position and gave his stamp of approval for the launch of the Drug Court in San Francisco, recalled retired Chief Executive Officer Gordon Park-Li.

“He had a lot of stories to tell about old-time San Francisco,” Park-Li said. “He was well-liked, not only by the Court staff, but also the district attorneys and the public defenders because he practiced locally before he was appointed to the bench.”

Many of Judge Desmond’s friends were grateful that they were able to spend what turned out to be their last evening with him recently when he attended the retirement dinner for Commissioner William Gargano, whose party was held Aug. 13, 2010, at the United Irish Cultural Center.

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"He was making the rounds from table to table as only Joe could do," recalled Justice Timothy A. Reardon of the First District Court of Appeal. "He was having a good time."

Justice Reardon and other colleagues said Judge Desmond had a sense of humor that will long be cherished for the laughter shared among friends.

"I most appreciated Joe for his sense of humor – maybe that was because he was of Irish descent," Justice Reardon said. "We had a lot of laughs together. He was a very good Judge too. He always seemed to get the fair and equitable result when he tried cases. You could not find a more decent Judge or person than Joe Desmond. I don't think he had any enemies. Everyone loved Joe. He treated everyone like they were related to him and maybe they were."

A graduate of St. Monica School and St. Ignatius College Preparatory, Judge Desmond made lifelong pals from his school chums, and this loyal band of brothers threw him birthday parties and competed for lunch dates with him after he retired from the Bench in 2002.

"He's what I would call a people's Judge," retired Judge Alex Saldamando said. "He really understood the human condition just about better than anyone I know. He is what I think most people would consider a just Judge. He could take your head off and he would make you feel good like he did you a favor. He had these wonderful stories, probably of which only 20 percent were true. One of his few faults was he could not tell a joke because halfway through, he would start laughing at his own jokes."

Judge Saldamando added, "A lot of people, including myself, have kissed the Blarney Stone. Joe used it as a pillow."

A visitation will be held at 1:30 p.m. Sunday, Aug. 29 at St. Ignatius Church, 650 Parker Ave., followed by a rosary at 2:30 p.m. A funeral Mass is scheduled for 10 a.m. Monday, Aug. 30, also at St. Ignatius. A reception will follow at the Irish Cultural Center 2700 45th Ave. (at Sloat).

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