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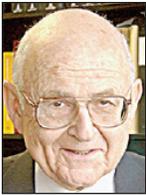
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'Premier lawyer' helped shape Maryland law, state bar

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Melvin J. Sykes

Longtime Baltimore attorney Melvin J. Sykes, who argued more than 200 cases before state appellate courts and helped shape Maryland law, died Monday after

an illness. He was 93.

Sykes retired in 2015 after 67 years of practice, the majority as a solo practitioner. Most recently, he was of counsel at Brown, Goldstein & Levy LLP.

"He had a generous heart, he was generous with his time and he was generous with his talent," said Dan Goldstein. "I admired him greatly and thought he stood as a paragon for what we should all aspire to."

Goldstein said he met Sykes in the 1980s and, being aware of his reputation, was "thrilled" to have a new mentor despite being an established attorney.

"My eyes and ears were wide open all the time," he said. "I'm not sure I was a good student but I certainly tried to gobble up as much learning as I could from that experience."

Sykes' practice was expansive, covering corporate law, contracts, medical malpractice, health care law, among other areas. He was also a founding member of Baltimore Neighborhoods Inc. and an early champion of fair housing.

Sykes spent more than 50 years on the Court of Appeals of Maryland Standing Committee

on Rules of Practice and Procedure and also participated in commissions aimed at shaping and updating Maryland law.

Court of Appeals Chief Judge Mary Ellen Barbera, in a statement, praised Sykes' "enduring and valuable contributions" to the committee and called him an "outstanding litigation and leader of the Maryland bar."

"Mr. Sykes' meritorious service to the State of Maryland, to his clients for 67 years and to the legal community offers attorneys throughout our state an example to which to aspire," she said.

Intellectual pursuits

Shale D. Stiller, a friend of Sykes' since the late 1950s, called him "the premier lawyer in Maryland for basically the last 60 years" based on trial and appellate work as well as scholarship.

An article Sykes wrote in 1949 — just one year after graduating from Harvard Law School — on a surviving spouse's right to the elective share was cited by the Court of Appeals as recently as 2008, according to Stiller.

"His intellect was superior to every other lawyer that I have known," Stiller said. "The interesting thing is he was never flamboyant about it or pushy. He never tried to push himself. He never talked about himself at all. I can say the pronoun 'I' was never in his vocabulary."

Sykes also was a scholar of Jewish law, translating from Hebrew a four-volume treatise written by a former Israeli Supreme Court justice and co-authoring a casebook on Jewish

law. He spoke multiple French, Italian and Latin in addition to Hebrew.

"He was a gentle person. He was awesome," Stiller said. "He had an intelligence that was superior to 99.9 percent of the lawyers who you will ever meet but he was a mensch. He never lorded it over anybody."

Goldstein said Sykes was constantly learning and staying abreast of developments in the law.

"When Mel would leave the office, other than on Friday afternoon, he would carry to the subway at least one briefcase bulging with reading for the evening," he said.

Judges responded to Sykes' dispassionate and straightforward approach to his cases, Goldstein added.

"He never told them what they ought to think, he simply calmly demolished the opponent's argument without ever raising his voice," he said. "I was never with him when a judge did not respond well to that, at any level."

Sykes earned significant credibility in the legal community because of his commitment to detail, according to Goldstein.

"His focus on accuracy was indeed his trademark because a judge could absolutely rely on anything Mel Sykes said," he said.

Family and faith

Despite a lengthy and busy career, Sykes always made time for his family, according to Stiller. Sykes is survived by

his wife, Judy, three children, 11 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

"With all of this work that he did, Mel was the quintessential family man," Stiller said, adding Sykes was "devoted" to Judy and that the pair were made for each other.

Goldstein said he has heard when Sykes' kids were young he would close his law firm for a month in the summer and take the kids on vacation.

"For a month, that's what he did," he said. "You couldn't reach him."

While sharing office space with Goldstein's firm, Sykes took pleasure in showing off his grandchildren.

"He was so proud of them," he said. "Whenever one came to Baltimore, he would bring them to the office and introduce the granddaughter or grandson to everyone."

Sykes saw enjoying life as a religious duty, according to Goldstein, and balanced work with family, faith and charity work.

"He was the most empirical person I ever met and yet somehow was a person of extraordinary faith and I could never figure out how he could be so intensely factual and yet be a person of faith at the same time," he said. "That was a mystery I never solved."

Funeral services for Sykes were held Tuesday afternoon. Sykes' family asks that in lieu of flowers, donations be made to any charity of the donor's choosing.