

Lawrence Yetka Supreme Court justice, DFL politician

Longtime judge, DFLer never lost his fascination for politics

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Once, during a presidential stop-over in Duluth, John F. Kennedy invited Lawrence Yetka to have a private chat. At the time, in September 1963, Yetka was a young Cloquet lawyer and DFL stalwart, and it was widely believed that he was in the running for a federal judgeship.

“There was much speculation that Larry would get that seat,” said longtime friend and colleague Paul H. Anderson. “But it was not to be.” Just a few weeks later, Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. And the federal judgeship for Yetka never materialized.

But he went on to serve nearly two decades on the Minnesota Supreme Court before retiring, in 1992, after a long and colorful career in law and politics. Yetka, who continued to volunteer as a hometown judge until his mid-80s, died Nov. 12 at age 93.

To Anderson, who also served on the state Supreme Court, Yetka was both a “very astute and dedicated politician” and a “superb jurist,” who discovered his calling early in life.

Yetka’s father, Frank, was a lawyer who helped found a forerunner of the DFL Party, and passed along his passion to his young sons. During the Depression, “my father taught my brother and me that we were living in the most turbulent times in the history of this country,” Lawrence Yetka recalled in a 1992 interview. “He made us sit down and listen to the speeches of Franklin Roosevelt.”

As a law student at the University of Minnesota in the 1940s, the younger Yetka began a lifelong friendship and political alliance with Hubert H. Humphrey when he started Students for Humphrey for Mayor. That Minneapolis campaign was the first of many on which they would collaborate, all the way through Humphrey’s 1968 presidential race.

In 1950, Yetka — once described as “a Humphrey with the volume turned down” — was elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives, where he served for 10 years. “He loved being in the Legislature,” said his son Frank Yetka, who is a lawyer in Cloquet. “He had an ability to get along with people on the other side of the aisle. Those were the days when you really vociferously disagreed [with opponents] and you went out at night and remained friends.”

He returned to civilian life and built his law practice in Cloquet until he was appointed to the state Supreme Court in 1973 by Gov. Wendell Anderson. Yetka almost turned down the position, but ended up loving it, said his son Frank. Over the next two decades, he wrote some 500 opinions, including major cases on the environment and civil rights. When a case pitted an individual against the power of the state, he almost always sided with the individual, colleagues said.

In 1992, Gov. Arne Carlson tried to extend Yetka’s term for two more years, until he reached the mandatory retirement age of 70. But when Alan Page sued to block the decision, and won, Yetka stepped down, clearing the way for Page’s election to the court.

Back in Cloquet, Yetka volunteered to fill in for local judges as needed, and retained his lifelong fascination with politics, even as he bemoaned “how toxic it has become on both sides,” said his son.

Anderson, who often found himself at odds with Yetka politically, agreed. “He very much regretted what he saw as a breakdown in the camaraderie and the ability to work with each other,” he said.

Yetka, who was married to his wife, Ellen, for 64 years until her death in 2015, is survived by sons Frank, Lawrence and Christopher Yetka; brother Richard Yetka, sister Alice Byrnes, four grandchildren and one great-grandchild. Services have been held.

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