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Fred Kelton 'Kelly' Gage Jr. Attorney, state senator

Mankato attorney leaves lessons in honor, integrity

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There is ample evidence that Kelly Gage was a pillar of his community. The longtime Mankato attorney and onetime state senator also served on the local school board and hospital board, as well as on the Minnesota State Colleges Board and the Metropolitan Sports Facilities Commission.

But it was the foundation of honor, hard work and integrity that he passed along to his children — in lessons great and small — that may be his most enduring legacy, his children say.

"He was Atticus Finch," Amy Gage said, comparing her father to the principled attorney in "To Kill a Mockingbird." "My dad to me had that sense of honor and that sense of duty."

Said son L.J. Gage: "He was very dedicated to his community and helping make things better in Mankato."

And Deborah Gage, the oldest child and a recently retired Wall Street Journal reporter, said, "He was smart and he was interesting and I consider him a guide to my life."

Gage, 92, died Oct. 5 after a period of declining health, said Deborah Gage. Yet, "he kept his wits right up until the end."

Fred Kelton "Kelly" Gage was born in Minneapolis in 1925, the son of an attorney also named Fred. The family went on to live in Hector and Fairfax, Minnesota towns that his children say gave their father a deep appreciation for small-town life. At 17, he joined the Navy, serving as a "Seabee" during World War II and helping build bases in North Africa and the Aleutian Islands. He earned a law degree from the University of Minnesota in 1950, and moved to Mankato where, in 1955, he became a partner in Blethen, Gage & Krause. Over the years, as he immersed himself in his community, he also conveyed lessons to his children

in words and deeds.

"He had a strong sense of giving back to the community," said Amy Gage, community liaison for the University of St. Thomas. "He drove Chevrolets because Dad did legal work for guy who ran the local Chevrolet dealership. You supported your community."

Honesty, too, was at the heart of those lessons.

"At a store one time when I was a kid, I noticed they gave me 10 cents extra in change. I told my dad — and he made me give it back," L.J. Gage said.

Deborah Gage was 14 when her father first ran for the Minnesota Senate and can still can sing his campaign song. But what stands out was the time that her father, a Republican, helped pass a bill that permitted abortion if the woman's life was threatened. He got hate mail for that, she said, but never wavered.

"He had a lot of guts and he would do the right thing, even when it was unpopular," she said.

Even when their father disagreed with them, his children said, he taught them valuable lessons, as when L.J. Gage was in high school and mulling his college choices. His father wanted him to stay in Minnesota. L.J. wanted to go to the University of Colorado.

"When I brought him the form to sign for Colorado, he said, 'This [is] the biggest mistake you'll ever make in your life.' But I was 18. He signed the form."

Was it a mistake? "It was great," said L.J. Gage, an executive with Philips HealthTech.

Gage is survived by his wife of 43 years, Dorothy, and five children: Deborah Gage of Oakland, Calif.; Penelope Reinders of Centennial, Colo.; Amy Gage of St. Paul; L.J. Gage of Needham, Mass., and Mary Mertesdorf of Good Thunder, Minn. He was preceded in death by a son, Fred Kelton Gage III, and his ex-wife Audrey Gage.

A memorial service is planned for Nov. 4 at Centenary United Methodist in Mankato.

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— Amy Gage, daughter