

Retired Circuit Judge William F. Coleman, 84, died May 31

June 2, 2014

Retired Circuit Judge William F. Coleman, 84, died May 31 at his Madison home, surrounded by his family. A memorial service will be held at 6 p.m. Sunday, June 8, at the Jackson Yacht Club.

Supreme Court Chief Justice William L. Waller Jr. called him “a truly dedicated public servant.” Although he retired from the Hinds County Circuit Court bench 18 years ago, Judge Coleman continued to hear cases as a senior status judge, accepting appointments from the Supreme Court to cases in which local judges recused themselves.

“He was very unselfish in accepting appointments to cases long after his retirement, and did not hesitate to preside over cases that no other judge was willing to accept,” Chief Justice Waller said. “I commend him for so selflessly offering his services almost up to the time of his death. He was truly a dedicated public servant, a stalwart of justice and one who was always committed to the rule of law.”

Judge Coleman served for 20 years as a circuit court judge of the Seventh Judicial District. Former Gov. Cliff Finch appointed him to the bench on Oct. 1, 1976. He was senior judge of the four-judge district at the time he retired on Dec. 31, 1996.

In addition to handling a crowded docket and numerous high-profile cases, he was instrumental in creating a public defender office for Hinds County, and he supported a statewide court administrator system. He oversaw the remodeling of the Hinds County Courthouse in Jackson.

Retired Circuit Judge L. Breland Hilburn, who served alongside Coleman, recalled his efforts to evenly distribute the caseload and to promote collegiality. He helped push for creation of a statewide system of court administrators. And the renovated courthouse, with two new wings added in the late 1980s, carries his vision of preservation combined with modernization.

Judge Coleman appointed Thomas Fortner as Hinds County’s first full-time public defender in 1991. Fortner and a staff of attorneys represented indigent people facing criminal charges in Circuit Court. The office replaced a piecemeal system of case by case appointments.

“I just can’t tell you how much I admired and respected him as jurist and as a person,” Fortner said. “He was a fair judge. He had hard cases. He didn’t shy away from the tough cases. He had to make some hard decisions on some really critical constitutional issues, and he wasn’t scared to rule the way he believed. He wasn’t scared of politics. He wasn’t scared of having to run for election. His rulings were strictly based on the law.”

Longtime Hinds County Circuit Clerk Barbara Dunn said, “He was all business in his court. He ran a good ship.”

Outside court, he enjoyed sailing, and kept a second home near the beach in Ocean Springs. Dunn had a vacation house on the same street before Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Coast. Judge Coleman rebuilt after the storm. Dunn recalled friends gathering for an annual boat trip to Horn Island for cookouts, and shrimp boils at her house.

Family and friends will gather Sunday, June 8, at 6 p.m. at the Jackson Yacht Club to celebrate Judge Coleman’s life.

William F. Coleman was born Sept. 19, 1929. He attended Millsaps College and Mississippi State University. He earned a law degree from the University of Mississippi in 1952, and was admitted to the Bar that same year. He practiced law in Jackson from 1960 until his appointment to the bench.

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