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IN TRIBUTE

For Judge Lewis, Equal Justice Was Daily Mission

By **FREDERICK S. GOLD**

Judge William B. Lewis died this past Memorial Day. For approximately 23 years, he served as a judge and judge trial referee in Stamford Superior Court, including a term as the court's presiding judge. Not only was he a great judge, his greatness was of a kind worth understanding and talking about.

It is true that Judge Lewis was an excellent technical judge. He was smart, scholarly, comfortable with a complicated factual or legal argument, and adroit at reducing complexity to simplicity. He knew the law, and he loved to learn it. When confronted with a subject new to him, he was a quick study; and he considered mastery of new legal issues his obligation. He was entirely comfortable adjourning a proceeding so he could read a case or study a statute.

It is also true that Judge Lewis was a masterful trial judge. He knew the rules of evidence. He let lawyers try their cases. He was receptive to all arguments, but was never afraid to make a tough call. When the circumstances called for tight judicial control, he was not afraid to exercise it. Most of the time, his touch was light and his guiding

hand almost invisible.

But none of this gets to Judge Lewis's greatness. He was a great judge simply because he believed passionately in the processes of our adversary system, and he profoundly respected the professionals who make those processes work. To Judge Lewis, a trial was a noble process, whose purpose was not only to resolve a particular dispute, but also to affirm the rights and dignity of each participant. The latter purpose was as important to him as the former.

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Judge Lewis's affection for the system and its players was transparent. Communicated through an ever present twinkle in his eye, it was also infectious. He radiated such respect for everyone in his courtroom that he received it back, in multiple ways both consciously and unconsciously, such as from lawyers whose arguments took the high road, in dignified tones, suffused with respect for the process, the court and the other side. The process of dispute resolution in Judge Lewis's courtroom was ennobling. It was a nobility that elevated all participants.

At the same time, Judge Lewis never neglected the nuanced particulars of each party's position. I have practiced in Stamford for almost two decades, and I have never heard of a lawyer or client who did not feel fairly treated by His Honor.

At his funeral, Judge Lewis was eulogized as someone who believed hard work is its own reward. The speaker was referring to the concept of self reward. But in Judge Lewis's case, his judicial work generated a ripple effect of rewards for others that is incalculable.

Consider the societal impact of a litigant who loses the case but feels fairly treated by the justice system. Consider the effect on a juror who carefully deliberates and decides, and comes away feeling that, when the justice system works, it does so because it is grounded in the same values of human dignity that we spend a lifetime outside the courtroom trying to vindicate. And consider the effect on a lawyer leaving Judge Lewis's courtroom with a visceral sense that the phrase "zealous advocacy" consists of two words, not one; and that, because of the second, it is not a synonym for "street fight."

I do not believe Judge Lewis was unique. I believe there are thousands of trial judges, state and federal, civil and criminal, throughout our country, who on a daily basis make real the promise of equal justice, fairly administered, based on discernable rules, all grounded in respect for the rights and dignity of each participant.

But if Judge Lewis was one among many, that only enhances, not diminishes, his greatness. He was one of us, but he represented the best in each of us. He embodied the values to which we all aspire, and that we can each achieve. For anyone who toils in the arena of our system of justice, there is no greater aspiration than to be worthy of Judge Lewis's legacy. ■

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