



Judge Robert W. Penn

April 30, 2015

Judge Robert W. Penn died at the age of 93 on April 30, 2015, hand-in-hand with his devoted daughter and compassionate caregivers in hospice after a seven-week illness.

Judge Penn served on the Toledo Municipal Court bench from 1984 to 1995, and subsequently as a visiting judge until the mandatory retirement age. He was considered by prosecutors and defense lawyers to be one of the most astute and erudite judges to sit on the bench. From time to time Penn encountered a former defendant who thanked him for his strict sentencing and it pleased him to hear that he turned his life around.

Robert Penn was one of nine children born to the deeply spiritual Roswell and Nellie Floy Penn in Athens, AL who instilled a love of God in their children by attending church regularly as a family and contributing financially and with service. The son of a well-respected sharecropper, Penn credited his longevity to the sixty miles he walked each week to attend Trinity School, a private missionary school initially established in 1865 to educate former slaves, but subsequently played an important role to educate blacks denied a public school education by the State of Alabama after the sixth grade. He attended Tuskegee Institute and enrolled in ROTC, but a shoulder problem prevented him from becoming an officer. He enlisted and served five years in the U.S. Army, including several years in the European Theater as a logistics and

supply sergeant. After spending three years in a military hospital in Denver, Penn was honorably discharged with a service-connected disability, which ultimately contributed to his death. He returned to Tuskegee to complete his Bachelor of Science degree in Agriculture, but was determined to leave the South, in search of the respect he experienced during his military service in Europe.

After his discharge, he moved to Toledo where his brother Paul lived. He bought a grocery store on Ironwood and Girard on Toledo's East Side, which he and his brother operated together. Determined to pursue a career in law, he applied to the law school at Western Reserve (now Case Western Reserve University). After graduating in 1953, Penn and classmate James B. Simmons, III, the son of Toledo's first black councilman, joined the elder Simmons' law firm, located on the second floor of an office at City Park and Indiana. Six years later, Penn opened his own law office. During his 31 year law practice, two attorney members of his firm, Joseph Flores and Charles Doneghy, subsequently became judges. Active in public service, he served as Chief Legal Counsel for the NAACP during the late 1950s and 1960s, President of the Civil Service Commission of the City of Toledo from 1971 to 1984, and member of the Administrative Board of Zoning Appeals from 1962 to 1978, and its president for five years. When he was appointed to the Municipal Court, he sold his law firm to another future judge, C. Allen McConnell. Penn also nurtured and mentored recently retired Federal Magistrate Judge Vernelis Armstrong and his law clerk, Myron Duhart, a current Lucas County Common Pleas Court judge.

In addition to his many civic-minded appointments, board memberships, and affiliations, Penn faithfully served Grace Presbyterian Church as an elder. He also loved the arts and served as president of the Toledo Opera Association and board member of the Toledo Symphony.

In September 1954, Robert Penn married the love of his life, the former Mary Louise Cowell of Toledo and enjoyed nearly 57 years of blissful matrimony until her death in 2011. He was a loving husband and referred to her as his soul mate.

He is survived by their only child, Crystal W. Penn of Philadelphia, PA, and dearly loved siblings, Hattie Wall and Charles Penn of Huntsville, AL, Paul (Delores) Penn of Toledo, and Oliver (Minnie) Penn of Dayton, OH, several cousins, and many beloved nieces and nephews, and a host of special friends, dedicated caregivers and colleagues. He joins his siblings who predeceased him, Roswell Penn Jr., Evelyn Martin, Gloria Hall, and Nellie Floy Penn.

Funeral services will be held at Grace Presbyterian Church at 11 a.m. on May 12 followed by interment in Ottawa Hills Memorial Park. A wake will be held from 5-8 p.m. at the Dale-Riggs Funeral Home on May 11. There will be no viewing. In lieu of flowers, the family requests that donations be made to Grace Presbyterian Church, or to the Robert, Mary, and Crystal Penn Fund at the Toledo Community Foundation which supports organizations which meant the most to him.

Tribute Wall

JS

“ A great friend, mentor, role model, and man. Robert Penn was a pioneer in Toledo and his life was a testament to hard work, perseverance and faith. He left an indelible impression on everyone he met and his influence and legacy will last long after his time here with us. So sorry for the loss to all of his great family especially Crystal.

Jeff Schroeder - May 25, 2015 at 09:25 PM

CC

“ Cynthia Martin and Darcel Caldwell purchased the Emerald Garden Basket for the family of Judge Robert W. Penn.



Cynthia Martin and Darcel Caldwell - May 08, 2015 at 03:05 PM

TT

“ Tynetta, Barbara, Joyce, Paula, Diana, Lynn, and Tina purchased the Beautiful in Blue for the family of Judge Robert W. Penn.



Tynetta, Barbara, Joyce, Paula, Diana, Lynn, and Tina - May 08, 2015 at 03:05 PM

CW

“ Judge Penn was truly one of the best. Our community is fortunate to have had him on the bench. He was respected no matter what side of the law one was on. Retired TPD officer Clint White.

Clint White - May 08, 2015 at 09:18 AM

NA

“ *In the early 1980's I had an abusive ex boyfriend and Judge Penn was the only person to help me. I will always remember his kindness to me. God Bless.*

Nancy - May 07, 2015 at 08:37 AM

SP

“ *Dear Folks,*

My deep sympathy to all of you at the passing of Judge Penn. He was a gentleman of character and great dignity, with a fine sense of humor and the best of values. I first met him about 45 years ago, when he was president of the civil service commission and I was an entry-level reporter at The Blade. The good impressions he left on me I have carried with me all these years, even though our paths soon diverged greatly, mine leading me to remote places across the world's great outdoors. My thoughts are with you, though I regret that I will be unable to attend services. Mr. Penn will be well remembered. I admired him very much.

Kindly,

*Steve Pollick
Outdoor Editor, retired
The Blade*

Steve Pollick - May 06, 2015 at 10:55 AM

GJ

“ *Glorietta Johnson lit a candle in memory of Judge Robert W. Penn*



glorietta johnson - May 04, 2015 at 07:32 PM

GJ

“ *Crystal our thoughts and prayers are with you. Uncle Robert was an amazing man. I know he touched the lives of many. Praying comfort and peace for you. Heaven has received a true soldier.*

glorietta johnson - May 04, 2015 at 07:30 PM

CJ

“ *My condolences to the family of Judge Penn. In the days ahead, may Jesus, our Jehovah, uphold you all in the palm of His hands. Cherish the many memories that you all share. May you experience the perfect peace from our risen Lord and Savior who made eternity in heaven a reality.*



cjt - May 04, 2015 at 10:11 AM

BC

The Church of the Living God - Jewell Dominion send sincere condolences to the Penn Family, especially Deacon Oliver Penn, in the loss of your dear brother. We pray also for the strength of the daughter he leaves behind. May God bless you and comfort you always as you heal from this loss.

Bishop Rosette Coney - May 05, 2015 at 12:51 PM

BS

My deepest sympathy To the family of Robert Penn. He was a remarkable man. May our dear Lord hold you closer during these most difficult times.

(Crystal.. I was your parents travel agent for years. Having retired 15 years ago, I lost touch, but never forgot the kindness they both extended to me)

Beverly Schoettley - May 06, 2015 at 09:46 AM

DG

May God's Grace comfort the Penn family during this difficult time.

Del & Kelli Grace - May 06, 2015 at 09:02 PM

RL

From the Lytle families in North Carolina and Tennessee, we share your loss and grieve with the Penn family. I remember a very long time ago visiting the Penn family in the 60's and remembering how very nice and hospitable Judge Penn and family were. It gives me a sense of knowing someone who made a difference in many people lives both as a community leader, role model and someone who cared for others. We are holding the Penn family up in the light.....our sincere condolences.

Rodney Lytle - May 07, 2015 at 09:26 AM

KD

Dear Crystal. My thoughts and prayers are with you during this difficult time. May the memories of your father help you find comfort. He is in the arms of the angels now. God bless you my friend.

Sincerely, Karen M. Dunne

Karen Dunne - May 07, 2015 at 10:52 AM

KS

*Crystal,
My sincere sympathy for the passing of your beloved father. I lost my father two years ago and certainly can relate to this profound loss. I remember your parents as such a supportive, loving and kind couple who were so proud of you. May warm memories and God's grace give you comfort and peace. If you are back in Toledo I would love to meet up for lunch or dinner. With best regards,
Kelly Griffith Shirer*

kelly shirer - May 27, 2015 at 07:47 PM