

## Tribute: Selfless commitment to young people

By Art Thompson

Tuesday, Jun 09, 2009 - 04:07:01 pm CDT

On May 30, we lost a towering figure, Wilfred W. "Bill" Nuernberger, the first judge of the separate Juvenile Court of Lancaster County and the one by which others will long be measured. He served for 33 years, 29 of them alone, and missed only one day on the bench.

Even more extraordinary was his impact on juvenile justice. Platte County Judge Gerald Rouse, also a vigorous advocate of young people, said Bill is "... in a class by himself, and considered to be a perfect example of what a juvenile judge should be ... He is absolutely one of the finest juvenile judges in the nation and Nebraska has been very lucky to have him."

Typical of the high regard in which Bill was held was his appointment by President Gerald R. Ford as one of 21 members of the National Advisory Committee for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. He was one of 26 members of the IJA/ABA Joint Commission on Juvenile Justice Standards that developed 26 volumes of standards for juvenile justice agencies across the nation.

Among his colleagues were Janet Reno, former attorney general of the United States, and now Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton. Then Attorney General Robert S. Kennedy appointed him one of 85 special advisers to the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime in the 1960s.

Bill's honors reflect his varied interests and deep commitment: National and State PTA Honorary Life Member; VFW Post 131 Outstanding Service Award; Gateway Sertoma Club Service to Mankind Award; Nebraska Chapter of Social Workers Public Citizen Award; American Legion Service Award; Franklin N. Flaschner Judicial Award; the Nebraska State Bar Association Award of Merit and Public Service Award; and the Lincoln/Lancaster County Bar Association Award for Distinguished Service.

He was president of the Capital City Kiwanis Club, the Nebraska Council of Juvenile Court Judges and the National Council of Juvenile Court Judges and served on the boards of Lincoln Community Foundation, Salvation Army, Nebraska Committee for Children & Youth, Masonic Home in Fremont, Lincoln Council on Alcoholism and Lincoln Community Council.

Ed Perry, Bill's former law partner, said that Bill's success as a trial lawyer was due to "... always being fully prepared as to both the facts and the law ..." He also understood "... that one's relationship with family, spouse, children and their God should not lose its place as the lawyer's first priority.

"As a result of his leadership, the Juvenile Court in Lancaster County ... is a beacon for juvenile courts throughout the country. Judge W.W. Nuernberger truly joins Dawes, Bryan, Pound, Rankin, Brownell and Van Pelt as eminent members of the Lincoln legal community."

Louis McHardy, executive director of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Justices, said: "He is one of the most genuinely wonderful people I have ever known. ... He is top-notch in his profession and has been at the forefront of the juvenile court system in the nation. ... I just can't say enough good things about him."

In mid-1982, Bill instituted the Victim Restitution Program which offered youth offenders (age 14-18) the opportunity to repay their victims. Those who did not have jobs or savings could work at minimum wage and earn up to \$400 toward restitution. Principal employers included the Lincoln Parks and Recreation Department, Lincoln Public Schools and the YMCA. Funding came from the Lincoln Legal Auxiliary, the Woods Charitable Fund, the Lincoln Community Foundation, the Nebraska Crime Commission, and the Cooper Foundation.

Throughout his career Bill's philosophy remained consistent: "Because there is no jury in a juvenile court, it is my job to remain completely impartial and not become a witness. I have to rely completely on the evidence at hand."

Bill applied this same clarity and conviction to the Cooper Foundation during his 16 years as a trustee. His probing questions urged further investigation, his intellect informed decisions and he was an ethical touchstone throughout his tenure.

In retirement, Bill and his wife, Marian, continued their commitment to young people as mentors at Elliott Elementary, where one of their three daughters, DeAnn Currin, is the principal.

No one was more selfless in his commitment to Lincoln's young people than Bill.

*Art Thompson is president of the Cooper Foundation.*

---

**Copyright © 2002-2009 Lincoln Journal Star. All rights reserved.**

[Print Page](#)