

**IOWA JUDGES ASSOCIATION  
MEMORIAL FOR JERRY L. LARSON**

Jerry L. Larson was born in Harlan, Iowa, on May 17, 1936. He resided there his entire life where he was always known as Jerry. He graduated from Harlan High School in 1954 and played on its football team. He received a Bachelor of Science degree in political science in 1957 from the University of Iowa and a Juris Doctorate degree in 1960. While at the University of Iowa College of Law, Jerry served as the editor of the law review. Following graduation, he clerked for Judge Martin Van Oosterhout of the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals. He returned to Harlan in 1961 to practice law with his father in the law firm of Larson and Larson. Jerry served as Shelby County Attorney for two terms and was appointed a district court judge for the Fourth Judicial District by Governor Robert Ray in 1975.

In 1978, Governor Ray appointed Jerry to the Iowa Supreme Court. He served on the court for 29 years and 9 months, to become the longest serving justice in the history of the state. Following his retirement in 2008, he served as a senior judge on the court until just prior to his death on April 25, 2018.

Jerry authored 991 majority opinions as a supreme court justice and served with 21 justices. His written opinions displayed a powerful command of the rules of grammar. His prose spoke with grace and beauty and always of justice. His dissents were to the point and written only to express what he believed to be fair. Jerry had great compassion for people who entered the court system, the rule of law, and equality. He possessed a moral compass that kept him grounded throughout life and a spirit that never failed to stand up to

injustice. Just as he never left Harlan, his experiences growing up in rural Iowa never left him. His casual attire and welcoming smile reflected his unpretentious, low-key approach to life. His speech was measured and concise. Unless on the bench in his robe, his judicial stature was never evident. Yet, at times, even his robe failed to cover his white socks and work boots in many of the official court portraits over the years. One of his law clerks who had traveled to the Shelby County Courthouse one Saturday morning for her interview for the position mistook him for the courthouse groundskeeper.

While his professional accomplishments were many, he saw more to life. He loved the outdoors, planting trees and tulips, fishing, and old cars. The oil stains from his 1957 Thunderbird are still observable in his old parking spot at the Judicial Branch Building. It's just part of the indelible mark he left behind. But his greatest joy was being a dad and a grandpa.

Jerry leaves behind his four children: Becky, a schoolteacher in Bettendorf; Jeff, the chief judge of the Fourth Judicial District; Suzy, a justice on the Iowa Supreme Court; and Dave, an attorney in Avoca. The supreme court seat that Jerry vacated when he retired in 2008 was the same seat assumed by Suzy in 2018.

Jerry is also survived by his 12 grandchildren and 6 great grandchildren. They held a very prominent position in his life and among the personal items displayed in his office. His office in Des Moines spoke nothing of him, but everything of his family.

The legacy left by Jerry far exceeds the longevity of his service. His sharp legal mind and quick wit blended together to produce a deep and genuine respect and affection from his colleagues on the bench and among the bar. He believed in an open court system and led this state, and the nation, in expanding courtroom media coverage and permitting cameras in the courtroom. The opinions he authored during his three decades on the court added to the body of law of this state in significant ways, and included some very famous and controversial cases. In one such case, he wrote with clear and pristine prose, "As tempting as it is to resolve this highly emotional issue with one's heart, we do not have the unbridled discretion of a Solomon. Ours is a system of law." Jerry cared deeply about the integrity of the courts, and our system of law, and was always careful to protect it.

Jerry was fond of telling stories of the judges and justices he worked with in the past as a way to carry forward our traditions and to impart the essential qualities of judging. He did the same through his own years of service, and his longevity enabled him to contribute immeasurably to the meaning of judicial service. He always displayed the understanding and courage to make the decisions required by the law, even when it would be unpopular. He had a fierce belief in judicial independence. He saw the goal of law was to be fair. When the interests of the parties in a case were in equal pose, or as Jerry would say, when the final decision was seen as a coin on edge, he saw justice as favoring those who were the least advantaged. Jerry exercised no particular judicial philosophy, or in his words, he had "no dog in the fight." He only sought to

understand what was fair and relied on the evidence as his guide. His fondness and understanding of nature and the environment helped form his understanding of law. He was a remarkable Iowa judge, and the Iowa judicial system is better for his service. He was Jerry.