

WILLIAM L. THOMAS 1945-2014, Judge, Sixth Judicial District 1981-2014

William L. Thomas, 68, died after a long, and for the most part peaceful, coexistence with colon cancer. He was diagnosed with cancer about six months after retiring and starting his senior judge status. At last, cancer did what it does, and Bill died on February 16, 2014.

Bill was born on July 21, 1945, in Pierre, South Dakota, the son of Herb and Lela (Shanks) Thomas. His parents divorced in 1947. Bill graduated from Theodore F. Riggs High School in 1963. He then graduated from the University of South Dakota in 1967, and the University of Iowa College of Law in 1973.

Bill met Julianne Thomas in seventh grade, and they became best friends during high school. They participated in plays, and were often debate partners. They went their separate ways during college, but remained in contact. Bill finally had the good sense to fall in love with his best friend and they were married on June 12, 1971, in Pierre, South Dakota, six days after Julie graduated from the University of Nebraska College of Medicine, and nine days before she began her pediatric residency at the University of Iowa. At the completion of her residency in 1974, she and Bill moved to Cedar Rapids, where they lived and worked ever since.

Bill began private law practice as an associate of Lew Eells and then became an Assistant Linn County Attorney in the Felony Division, under the genial and thoughtful guidance of County Attorney Gene Kopecky. In 1979 he resumed private practice with the firm of Crawford, Sullivan, Read and Roemermann. In 1981 he was appointed Judge in the Sixth Judicial District, where he served until the end of 2006, when he retired and took senior status. He served as a Senior District Court Judge until January 16, 2014, when he fully retired.

Early in his tenure as a judge, Bill concluded that many lawsuits, especially family cases, did not involve serious disputes about the law, but involved major personal conflict between the parties. In attempting to find a better way to resolve these disputes, he took both civil and family mediation training at the National Judicial College. He was then instrumental in the development of the Sixth Judicial District Family Mediation Program, which began in 1996.

He served on the Board of Directors of the Iowa Peace Institute in Grinnell, the National Board of the Academy of Family Mediators, which merged with other dispute resolution organizations and became the Association for Conflict Resolution. He was then on the National Family Council for the ACR, and the Board of Directors of the Institute for the Study of Conflict Transformation. He served as chair of the Sixth Judicial District's Mediation Advisory Committee from its inception until late 2013.

In 2002, he discovered kayaking, and became seriously hooked. He did brief training programs in San Diego, Washington, D.C. and then a week long program at the Kayak Academy in Seattle in 2005, during which he celebrated his 60th birthday with the other participants and the appropriate amount of champagne, while camped on an island in Puget Sound. He was fortunate to also paddle in Alaska, Lake Michigan, Lake George in upstate New York, and the Florida Everglades, where he had lunch with alligators. He did three Great River Rumbles in 2006-08, each a week-long trip on a tributary of the Mississippi and the great river itself. He paddled a

variety of rivers and lakes in Iowa and surrounding states. The best trip, however, was a ten-day catamaran and kayak trip in the Galapagos Islands off the coast of Ecuador in 2007.

Those of us who were lucky enough to know Bill as a judge and colleague were always grateful for his patience, humor, compassion for those who appeared in his courtroom (including attorneys) and his excellent skills as a trial judge and amazing way with words. Even the clerks who processed his rulings loved reading what he wrote, as they were usually filled with wry and spot-on observations of the litigants and their lives. I believe Bill's writing abilities came from his life-long love of books and all things written. I don't think I ever saw Bill without a book in his hand, and his house is filled to the rafters with books and articles on everything under the sun.

Bill was a devoted son to his mother, who lived in Pierre until he moved her to Cedar Rapids when she was 90 years young. His mother passed away at the age of 100, less than a month before Bill passed. Even though Bill was very ill, he drove with Julie in the depths of a miserable January winter to bury his mother in Pierre.

Bill was predeceased by his parents, his elder brother John, three aunts and two glorious golden retrievers, Barney and Jake. He is survived by his wife of 42 years, Dr. Julianne Thomas, with whom he shared an extraordinarily devoted and loving relationship for decades, and his goddaughter, Caitlin Kinsey.

Bill's was a life well-lived. Anyone who knew him is a better person for it. He always had a smile on his face, even as he "co-existed" with cancer. His wit was with him to the end. As he lay dying and was slipping in and out of consciousness, Julie kissed him on the cheek and he immediately popped up, kissed her warmly and drifted off again. When he had another moment of lucidity, Julie asked if he remembered giving her a lovely kiss, to which he replied "Well, that was smart of me, wasn't it?"

Bill will always be remembered for his humor, wisdom and love.

May this remembrance be spread upon the records of the Iowa Judges Association and a copy sent to his devoted wife.

Dr. Julianne Thomas
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