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FORMER JUDGE WAS THE GUY KIDS LOVED: EXTRAORDINARY LIFE

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Abstract

Few people would have predicted when Sullivan was a young man that he would graduate from college, earn two master's degrees, practice law, and reach the pinnacle of a legal career: an appointment to the bench. Like many prosecutors, Sullivan felt he could have the greatest impact on criminal justice as a prosecutor -- the person who decides whom to indict, which charges to bring, whether to take a case to trial, the amount of bail (subject to review by a judge) and what a sentence should be.

Full Text

To most people, Terry Sullivan was hardworking, intense, somewhat of a loner. He was a Superior Court judge, highly respected by colleagues and lawyers for his intelligence and dedication to the law.

But he had a private side he reserved for family and friends: he was a man who loved children, flew planes and sailed. A friend joked that the dogs in his neighborhood mourned him as much as his family -- they called him the dog whisperer, the one who fed the dogs bologna and hot dogs on his deck.

"He was perceived as austere, and on the bench he was very businesslike, but off the bench, he was very interested in other people and their lives," said a colleague, Judge Patricia Swords.

Terence Anthony Sullivan 77, a longtime resident of Willington, died in Corpus Christi, Texas, on Aug. 18.

Few people would have predicted when Sullivan was a young man that he would graduate from college, earn two master's degrees, practice law, and reach the pinnacle of a legal career: an appointment to the bench. Hating school, he dropped out of Windham High School at 16. He immediately joined the Navy in 1955 and became a hospital corpsman, serving mostly in the Boston area. He was born Feb. 24, 1938, to Velma and John Sullivan, who worked at Pratt & Whitney. His upbringing was modest; in his family, college wasn't the inevitable next step after high school.

In the Navy, something changed in him ? perhaps sparked by meeting Mary Dolan, a student at Emmanuel College in Boston, at a dance at Chelsea Naval Hospital. He obtained a GED certificate, and after he was discharged from the Navy, enrolled in the University of Connecticut.

Terry and Mary married in 1961. After obtaining a bachelor's in experimental psychology, he began working for **Aetna** . He soon knew that insurance wasn't the career for him, and began his lifelong career as a state employee. He became a counselor at one of the state prisons in Somers, and obtained a master's in psychology. He switched jobs and became a parole officer, and decided he wanted to become a lawyer.

While working full time and raising his two older children, Sullivan began to study law at night at the University of Connecticut School of Law. It took five years, but he graduated in 1970. "I didn't see him at all," said Mary Sullivan, who worked as a social worker at Mansfield Training School.

With a law degree, the career field opened up for Sullivan. He worked for a year as a public defender, representing lower-income defendants. When an opening occurred, he was appointed assistant prosecutor. He later was promoted to state's attorney for Windham County, where he worked until he was appointed judge in 1989. He later served as administrative judge in Tolland County Superior Court, senior judge and trial court referee.

As a prosecutor, Sullivan often practiced in front of Superior Court Judge Jonathan Kaplan in Tolland and Windham counties. "Anything you sent to him, he just did it," said Kaplan, now a senior judge. "He didn't complain. ... He wasn't a flamboyant guy. He was a very steady person, a measured guy."

Patricia Swords met Sullivan when he was a supervisory prosecutor in Superior Court in Rockville, where she was a defense lawyer, and later an assistant prosecutor. "He was kind of a mentor to me," said Swords, who is now a senior judge of the Superior Court. "I learned a lot about the law and trial practice [from Sullivan]," she said. "He had great common sense. He could figure out what motivated a defendant, and figure out the other side's defense."

Like many prosecutors, Sullivan felt he could have the greatest impact on criminal justice as a prosecutor -- the person who decides whom to indict, which charges to bring, whether to take a case to trial, the amount of bail (subject to review by a judge) and what a sentence should be.

In the courtroom, Sullivan was businesslike, courteous and attentive to detail. "He didn't get distracted by things that were coming at you from out of the blue," Swords said. When she was a young prosecutor without much trial experience, "I'd try to pick his brain about the way to approach the case," she said. "He'd make some suggestions about what I might [learn] from the defendant, and how I might contradict him."

Helped by his advice, she won her first trial in the Rockville court.

"He let me figure it out on my own He gave you a little confidence," Swords said.

"Terry was this really solid, down to earth guy ? and everything Terry ever got he earned for himself," Swords said. "It gave him an appreciation for people who work hard and

have adversity in their lives."

When Sullivan served as administrative judge in Tolland, he was one of the few judges who volunteered to review petitions from prisoners who feel they have been improperly imprisoned, or who are complaining about the conditions of their confinement. Dealing with habeas corpus petitions "was very hard," Kaplan said. "There aren't a lot of people wanting that assignment. The inmates are always unhappy with their situation, and they don't win very often." Kaplan estimated that Sullivan wrote 35 to 40 habeas decisions. "It's very rare to find someone innocent."

While other judges often lunched together, Sullivan brought his sandwich and ate in his chambers. He turned down all requests to give him a birthday party, a party honoring a promotion or a retirement party. "He just didn't look for accolades," Kaplan said.

Outside of work, Sullivan was a different man. "He was the go-to guy for feeding dogs," said Willington neighbor Dave Benson. "They'd show up, and he would give them bologna. The dogs loved him." Sullivan also had an exceptional rapport with children. Benson's children were frequent visitors, offering to sell Sullivan dandelions or their pet rocks ? and Sullivan always bought them (and refused to be reimbursed). He liked to read to visiting children, and enjoyed playing with them or with the dogs. He liked talking about his hobbies: he built a ham radio, he owned a sailboat, and had been a pilot since he was 16 and had saved his money to take flying lessons. He was part of a flying club whose members shared a Cessna, and he enjoyed short jaunts around Connecticut in the single-engine plane. (When Mary was a passenger, she kept her eyes closed the whole time.) But he never talked about his work, Benson said. "He was the neighbor you trusted."

Maureen Sullivan, the youngest of his three children, also saw a different side of her father. Born after he had finished juggling law school and a job, she saw more of her father as a child than her brothers had. "He used to do handstands with me, or play silly games," she said. His entertainment choices -- with her at least -- were humorous: "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World" and "The Simpsons." "He'd laugh till he cried," Maureen said. He encouraged her in her studies -- she is now a teacher in Texas. "He was a great mentor -- but not a guy who went out to dinner." He was a survivor of the Hartford Circus Fire of 1944, where he went with his pregnant mother and younger sister. Few people knew. "He never talked about himself," his daughter said.

The night he came home and told his wife that he had been appointed to the bench, Mary suggested going out to celebrate. He said he'd rather eat in. "He was a super simple guy," his daughter said.

Sullivan's modest demeanor extended to his daily life. He drove used cars, didn't care about clothes, and lived in the same raised ranch for decades. He also paid for college and graduate school for all three of his children, including medical school for his son John. "He was frugal for himself, but not for his children," Maureen said. "He really was as selfless as it sounds."

Sullivan is survived by his wife, Mary, three children: Maureen, Michael and John Sullivan, and five grandchildren.

Tolland County State's Attorney Matthew Gedansky appeared in front of Sullivan for more than a decade. "He was a true believer in the process and in the Constitution. He followed the law and respected it, and was one of the best judges I ever appeared in front of. ... He had a tough exterior, but he appreciated what everyone was going through: the defendant, the defendant's family, the victim and his family. ... The less-informed lawyers were intimidated; the experienced lawyers learned he was the one you wanted to appear in front of."

Credit: ANNE M. HAMILTON, Special to The Courant

Illustration

PHOTO: B&W, FAMILY PHOTO; Caption: TERRY SULLIVAN, a longtime resident of Willington and a Superior Court judge, was a family man who loved children and dogs.

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