



SUPERIOR COURT OF
CALIFORNIA
COUNTY OF NAPA
825 Brown Street
Napa, CA 94559
www.napa.courts.ca.gov

707-299-1100

Cynthia P. Smith
Presiding Judge

Robert E. Fleshman
Court Executive Officer

NEWS RELEASE

Release Date: February 13, 2023

In Memoriam: Longtime Napa Superior Court Judge Phil Champlin Served the Community for More Than Five Decades

Champlin served Napa County for 56 years, first in private practice and later as a distinguished jurist for the Napa Superior Court.

NAPA, CA – On February 13, 2023, the honorable Philip Alden Champlin, who served as a judge for the Napa Superior Court from 1978 to 2021, died Friday in Napa after an extended illness. He was 83.

Judge Champlin was born in Annapolis, Maryland in 1939. He attended Yale University, earning his B.A. in Psychology in 1961, and then attended the University of California, Berkeley School of Law, where he received his J.D. in 1964.

From there his career in law took off on a multi-decade trajectory. Judge Champlin began by serving as an associate for the law firm of Coombs and Dunlap in 1965. He was elevated to a partner in the firm within two years where he remained until 1977. In 1978, Philip Champlin became a Napa County Municipal Court judge. He was then elevated to the Napa County Superior Court a year later and remained until retiring from active service in 2000. Judge Champlin also served as a Justice Pro Tem for the California Court of Appeals First Appellate District in the 1990s as well as an assigned judge for the Napa Superior Court in various capacities until his second and final retirement in Fall 2021.

Many have recognized Judge Champlin over the years, and many now recall his admirable record of service to Napa:

Said Congressman Mike Thompson when praising Judge Champlin on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives in 2000, saying: “Few people make an impact on their community the way Philip Champlin has improved and touched ours. Both on and off the bench, his integrity and intelligence have enhanced the quality of life for those around him. Be it through his judicial efforts or his community involvement with the Red Cross, Rotary, Boy Scouts and other civic groups, he has made contributions that will be remembered for a very long time.”

Said Napa Superior Court Presiding Judge Cynthia P. Smith: “Judge Champlin’s record of service in Napa is unparalleled, ranking among our longest serving judicial officers in the court’s history. During his fifty-six years of active service in the county, first as an attorney and then a judge, he was a mentor and friend to many of us. We’re forever thankful for his contributions to the legal community and the court.”

Said Napa Superior Court Assistant Presiding Judge Victoria Wood: “Philip Champlin was a very good man. Unpretentious and authentic to his core. We were lucky to have him serve Napa County for so many years and he will be sorely missed.”

Said Napa Superior Court Judge (Retired) Scott Snowden: “Phil Champlin’s is a story of devotion and service. His first and great devotion was to the sparkling, ebullient Lynne McWilliams, his wife of 56 years and to their son Chris and their daughter Cathy. His service was first as a respected attorney representing the people and businesses of our community, as a Deputy City Attorney of Napa, and City Attorney of Yountville, then as a Judge of the Napa Municipal Court, and then as a Judge of the Napa Superior Court. Throughout the years, his service was characterized by intelligence, courage, courtesy, and grace. His story is a noble one. The likes of Judge Philip Champlin will not soon pass this way again.”

Said Napa Superior Court Judge (Retired) Raymond Guadagni: “I have always had the highest regard for Judge Champlin. He was a fundamentally kind and caring individual, and an empathetic human being. During his 22 years on the bench, he was a rock in the foundation of the courthouse. At judges’ meetings, as we aired our opinions, Judge Champlin would sit quietly listening to all the different viewpoints of his colleagues. When he finally expressed his opinion, it usually resolved the issue before us. Even in our meetings, he played the role of the wise judge. While many know he was an excellent jurist on the bench, it was less known how much work he did and how many hours he put in to improving access to the courtroom for the citizens of Napa County. He participated at the state level in supporting delay reduction so that cases would come to court within a year, instead of the many years that had been the norm. He also helped create a dedicated family law division to improve the process of dealing with family matters. Despite his many achievements on the bench and in his work with the state, I never heard him boast. When I attempted to compliment him and let him know how special he was to our community, he said, “I’m just a soldier in the trenches.” That view, however, was not shared by those of us who knew better. He was one of the greatest leaders and educators in the history of our court. It was a true pleasure and an honor to have him in my life as a colleague and friend. Napa County is grateful for his long and dedicated service.

Said Napa Superior Court Judge (Retired) Ronald Young: “I was saddened to learn of Judge Phil Champlin’s passing. He was thoroughly dedicated to the betterment of our community. Judge Champlin served for over four decades with intelligence and integrity. Additionally, he was recognized statewide as a leader in judicial education.”

Said Napa Superior Court Judge (Retired) Francisca Tisher: “Judge Champlin volunteered to be my mentor when I was a new judge and provided me with invaluable insight and support. We have lost a great jurist who cared deeply about the law and served fairly and thoughtfully.”

Said Napa Superior Court Judge (Retired) Diane Price: “Judge Champlin was devoted to the court, justice and his colleagues on the bench. He was quite the entertaining storyteller and knew more about Napa County court history and the legal community than anyone. He will be greatly missed.”

Said Napa Superior Court Judge (Retired) Richard Bennett: “Phil has been a beacon of the legal community not only in Napa County but statewide, as a practicing attorney, as a Municipal Court Judge, as a Superior Court Judge, as an assigned Associate Justice on the Court of Appeal for the First District, and as an assigned judge statewide. Most recently, he has served as settlement judge for the Napa Superior Court. He has been a friend (and fellow motorcyclist) for 50 years, including 6 years when we served together in the Napa court system. He had a wonderful tempering hand and a deep understanding and dedication to the profession of law, and of being a judge.”

Said Napa Superior Court Executive Officer Bob Fleshman: “Fifty-six years of service to the people of Napa, and surrounding counties, is an extraordinary achievement. Given his extensive track record in the legal arena and local community organizations, Judge Champlin will be long remembered as both a titan as well as being a pillar of fairness, determination, and grit.”

Said Napa Superior Court Executive Officer (Retired) Richard Feldstein: “Judge Champlin was an outstanding jurist and local justice system leader. His many invaluable contributions over his decades of service still serve as the foundation of an outstanding justice system the Napa community continues to benefit from to this today. He will be deeply missed.”

Said Deputy Court Executive Officer Maureen Larsen: “Judge Champlin was a wonderful judge. I will always be reminded of how instrumental he was in participating in the development and implementation of statewide rules that instituted delay reduction in the California Courts. Judge Champlin not only cared about litigants having their day in Court, but it was also important to him that access to the courts was timely. We will miss him and are forever grateful for his service to the Napa Courts and the people of Napa County.”

Judge Champlin received numerous awards for his public service contributions, including work with the local bar, rotary, education, and the Boy Scouts. In 1987, he was named the Napa Citizen of the Year by the Napa Chamber of Commerce and KVON Radio. He also was named a Silver Beaver by the Silverado Council of the Boy Scouts of America in 1985, an organization in which he served as president, and was likewise granted the Award of Merit by the Napa District of Boy Scouts in 1984. He was also a trustee, and later president, of the Napa Community College.

Judge Champlin was a dedicated family man throughout his life. He was married to Lynne McWilliams for over 56 years and together they had two children, Christopher and Catherine Champlin.

If you have any questions, please contact the Court Executive Office at 707-299-1110 or at Court.Administration@napa.courts.ca.gov.

