

Rick Teitelman – a friend of justice

Missouri Supreme Court Judge Richard B. Teitelman died in his sleep this week. He was 69.

Rick was a friend of the Journalism Review, a friend of mine and, most important, a friend of equal justice.

When Rick graduated from Washington University Law School he couldn't find a job. There wasn't much of a market for a legally blind lawyer, even if he was smart enough to have gotten a perfect 800 on his SATs in high school. Rick started his own law office, taking a bus to appointments.

In the mid-1970s he went to work for Legal Services and rose to lead the program in St. Louis. I got to know Rick around that time. I was writing for the Post-Dispatch about Ronald Reagan's attempt to kill the Legal Services program. Rick was a great source of news and never failed to write a typed note when he thought a story was well-done – a nice reward for reporters used to nastygrams. Teitelman also liked to take reporters to a downtown deli where he dined on delicacies like liver and onions.

On the editorial page of the Post-Dispatch we called for Teitelman's appointment to the Missouri Supreme Court. Gov. Bob Holden agreed and appointed Teitelman in 2002. He became the first Jewish and legally blind member of the court. In 2004 he withstood a campaign to block his retention for being too liberal. Our editorial condemned the right-wing "smear campaign."

Every time we planned a fundraiser for the Journalism Review, Teitelman was there lending his support. A month ago, Teitelman attended a lunch with friends of Saint Louis University law school where I presented a GJR project on

Ferguson. Teitelman spoke candidly about what lawyers and judges could do to bring about reforms. That passion for equal justice still burned.

[Judge Richard Teitelman, liberal lion of Missouri Supreme Court, dies at 69](#)

Here is the Supreme Court's obituary:

SUPREME COURT OF MISSOURI MOURNS LOSS OF ITS
COLLEAGUE,

JUDGE RICHARD B. TEITELMAN

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. – It is with great sadness that the Supreme Court of

Missouri acknowledges the passing of its beloved colleague, Judge Richard

Teitelman, at his home today in St. Louis. Judge Teitelman began his service

on the state's high court in March 2002 and served as its chief

justice from July 2011 through June 2013. He was 69. In honor of Judge

Teitelman, the Court cancelled oral arguments scheduled for today.

"Judge Teitelman had immense compassion for others," Chief Justice

Breckenridge said. "He dedicated himself, both personally and professionally, to ensuring that every person receives justice in our courts. He was always aware that each of his decisions impacted and changed the lives of real people, and he worked tirelessly to ensure that each decision was fair and just. He delighted in talking to both lawyers and the lay community about the law, and delighted in the success of his fellow lawyers and judges."

Breckenridge continued, "Judge Teitelman's love of justice and the law was paralleled only by his love of people. He provided support and encouragement to his friends in the things that mattered most to them. And he considered almost everyone he met a friend. He had a remarkable ability to retain and recall information about people and events, and to find connections with each of them. His seemingly boundless energy, enthusiasm, and empathy strengthened and gave hope to those around him in thoughtful

and meaningful ways. Judge Teitelman will be missed tremendously.”

Teitelman was born September 25, 1947, in Philadelphia. He received his

bachelor’s degree in mathematics in 1969 from the University of

Pennsylvania and his law degree in 1973 from the Washington University

School of Law in St. Louis. He ran his own solo law practice until joining

Legal Services of Eastern Missouri in St. Louis in 1975, working his way up

through that organization’s leadership and serving almost two decades as

its executive director and general counsel. He served as a judge of the

Missouri Court of Appeals, Eastern District, from January 1998 through

February 2002.

Teitelman was Missouri’s first Jewish and first legally blind judge. At his

formal swearing-in ceremony at the Supreme Court, Teitelman paraphrased

Helen Keller in telling the crowd, "For a committed life, one has to have

fidelity to a noble purpose, and for me, that purpose has been the fight

for justice." But he added, "This installation is not about me. It is

about the people I have worked with and the people I have served."

Supreme Court Clerk Bill L. Thompson said, "Although legally blind, Judge

Teitelman's vision of compassion, generosity, and encouragement of others

was perfect."

Teitelman had a long commitment to public service and bar activities. He

was a member of numerous local bar associations throughout the state and,

for the Bar Association of Metropolitan St. Louis, served as chair of its

young lawyers section, chair of its trial section, secretary, vice

president and president and also served as president of its bar foundation.

At The Missouri Bar, Teitelman served as chair of the disabled, minority and diversity law committee of the young lawyers' section, chair of the delivery of legal services committee, and member of both the board of governors and its executive committee. He was elected vice president and president-elect, the position he held at the time he was appointed to the Supreme Court. At the national level, Teitelman was very active with the American Bar Association. He was a past chair of its standing commission on mental and physical disability law, a member of its standing pro bono and public service, a judicial division member of the standing committee on minorities in the judiciary, and was a lifetime fellow of the American Bar Foundation. He also participated in a number of civic and charitable activities, both in St. Louis as well as at the state and national levels. He also was a member of the Supreme Court Historical Society.

In addition, Teitelman was honored with numerous awards throughout his

career, including The Missouri Bar's President's Award, Spurgeon Smithson

Award and Purcell Award for Professionalism; awards from the Bar

Association of Metropolitan St. Louis and Mound City Bar Association; and

awards from the National Conference of Metropolitan Courts, the American

Jewish Congress, the American Council for the Blind and the St. Louis

Society for the Blind.

A memorial service for Judge Teitelman is scheduled for 2 p.m. Thursday,

December 1 at Graham Memorial Chapel on the Washington University campus in

St. Louis. Arrangements are under the direction of Berger Memorial Chapel,

9430 Olive Boulevard, St. Louis.