

IN MEMORIAM



THOMAS L. STEFFEN

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Supreme Court Justice Thomas Lee Steffen passed away at the age of 90 on September 1, 2020. Justice Steffen sat on the Nevada Supreme Court from 1982 to 1997, serving as both an associate justice and the chief justice. Known for his even temperament, his fairness, his intellect, and his devotion to the public good, Justice Steffen was considered one of the most influential and important attorneys in this state's history.

Justice Steffen was born on July 9, 1930, in Tremonton, Utah, a small rural community. His parents, Conrad Richard Steffen and Jewel McGuire Steffen, valued hard work and education and passed their work ethic and values on to their son. Justice Steffen played baseball and football at Bear River High School in Utah, where he was also a champion boxer. Additionally involved in scouting, he attained Eagle Scout rank and was chosen as one of only two Eagle Scouts in the United States to represent the Boy Scouts of America at a special convention in Hawaii. He went on to graduate from the University of Utah, much of which was accomplished while working full time and raising a young family.

Justice Steffen was a lifelong member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). As a faithful member of his church, he served in many capacities, including completing a mission in Western Canada. It was after this mission when he met his future wife, LaVona (Vonie) Ericksen, and they were married and sealed in the Salt Lake City temple in 1953. Justice Steffen and Vonie were married for 62 years until Vonie's death in 2015.

Justice Steffen's legal career began in 1961, when he moved his family to Washington, D.C., so that he could attend The George Washington University Law School. While there, Justice Steffen served on the Editorial Board for The George Washington Law Review from 1963-1964, publishing a major article and a case note. In addition to studying, he worked full time as a contracts negotiator for the Bureau of Naval Weapons and even moonlighted as a policeman on Capitol Hill for one semester, while Vonie was a stay-at-home mother to the couple's (then) four young children. Justice Steffen acknowledged that being a full-time caregiver was a far greater task than being an attorney or judge, and he often

claimed that Vonie was responsible “for at least 60 percent” of all he earned or accomplished in his life. Justice Steffen graduated from law school with honors in 1964.

Justice Steffen intended to return to Utah following law school. But after missing the sitting for the Utah bar exam, he reconsidered his options and decided to move his family to Nevada, where he passed the bar exam in 1964 and entered private practice in Las Vegas. Justice Steffen had a very successful civil trial practice in the state and federal courts, making quite a name for himself. Widely admired as one of the most effective lawyers in the state, he never lost a single bench or jury trial during his private practice years as a complex business litigator. Justice Steffen specialized in representing builders and developers against lenders; however, he also enjoyed practicing in the areas of medical malpractice, personal injury, and intentional tort law. Active in both the legal community and the community at large, he also served as director of the Nevada Trial Lawyers Association and gave time to community and church service.

Although happy in private practice, colleagues and judges alike urged Justice Steffen to consider judicial service, and when a seat became vacant in 1982, Governor Robert List appointed Justice Steffen to the Nevada Supreme Court, where he served until 1997. During his 15-year tenure on the Nevada Supreme Court, he had the opportunity in 1988 to earn an LL.M. degree in the judicial process from the University of Virginia. Justice Steffen had a reputation of being a prepared and meticulous jurist who labored over his opinions, taking pleasure in finding precisely the right word or phrase. His carefully crafted opinions expressed the court’s legal decision with unique and remarkably powerful prose. He was also the chief justice during his final year on the court when the controversial judicial discipline case of former Washoe County District Court Judge Jerry Carr Whitehead dominated his time and attention. This case very much divided the court, and in Justice Steffen’s words, “is far and away the most destructive case this court has ever entertained. And if you asked me the most important case I ever worked on, I would without a doubt tell you the *Whitehead* case.”

During his tenure with the supreme court, Justice Steffen also invested in the legal community, serving as Honorable Tom C. Clark Lecturer with the American Judges Association in 1984, on the Executive Committee of Brigham Young University’s Board of Visitors at J. Reuben Clark Law School from 1984-1989, on the Nevada State-Federal Judicial Council from 1985-1991, as Master with the Bruce R. Thompson chapter of the American Inns of Court from 1988-1996, as Chairman of the Nevada Code of Judicial Conduct Study Committee from 1990-1991, as Robert Houghwout Jackson Lecturer with the National Judicial College in 1995, and as

Chairman of the Nevada Judicial Council from 1995-1996. He gave tireless effort to his work and contributions to the legal profession and community. In 1997, after retiring from the Nevada Supreme Court, Justice Steffen became a vital member of the Hutchison & Steffen law firm, serving as Of Counsel and working alongside his youngest son John and his close friend Mark Hutchison. In remembering Justice Steffen, Mark Hutchison noted "his moral character and courage, his basic human kindness, his great affection and sacrifice for his family, and his deep love for the country and the State he served for so long."

Justice Steffen enjoyed life to the fullest with many different interests and passions, including BYU football. However, his greatest passions were three-fold: his family, his faith, and his work. He continually reminded his children that his greatest accomplishment of all was his marriage and family. Everything else was, in his words, "Second Fiddle!" He is survived by his 5 children (Elizabeth, Catherine, Conrad, John, and Jennifer), 22 grandchildren, and 32 great-grandchildren. Justice Steffen passed away in Hendersonville, Tennessee, where he and Vonie had moved to be near their daughter Cass and son-in-law Tod, who took care of assisting them in their final years. As District Court Judge David Hardy, who clerked for Justice Steffen and later followed in his footsteps to the judiciary, remarked following his death, "Justice Steffen died as he lived: with fidelity to family, faithful to convictions, dignified in presence, and heroic to all who had the privilege of working for him. His deep imprint on Nevada justice shall remain timeless."

