

Remembering CSCHS Board Member Tom McDermott

BY EDWARD S. RENWICK

LAST YEAR, WE LOST a good friend and long-time member of the California Supreme Court Historical Society Board of Directors, Thomas J. McDermott, Jr. Still practicing law full time at the age of 90 from his Palm Desert office, Tom passed away peacefully at his La Quinta home.

Tom was a proud father and family man, a skilled lawyer, a trusted advisor and advocate for his clients, a leader in his profession as well as his community, and a good friend to those who knew him. He was one of those people who made the world a better place.

Tom and I got to know one another through the practice of law. We were both admitted to practice at the same time in January 1959; we both joined the Los Angeles County Bar Association at about the same time; we both were hired by small but well-known L.A. law firms at about the same time; and, as best I recollect, we both became members of the Society Board at about the same time. It seemed as though our paths regularly crossed, and we became friends.

Tom grew up in Santa Monica and earned his B.A. from UCLA and served in the U.S. Army, including a tour in Korea. At UCLA Law School he was a top student.

He met his future wife Yolando Amante Jatap during the 1989 attempted d'état in the Philippines when they were taken hostage at their hotel in Manila, a story the couple told and embellished over the years. The McDermotts have two children, Kimberly and Kish, and two grandchildren, Trystan and Skylar.

Tom began his legal career as an associate with the Los Angeles law firm of Gray, Binkley and Pfaelzer, rising to partner in 1964. Three years later, Tom became a partner of the successor firm of Kadison, Pfaelzer, Woodward, Quinn & Rossi. The 1970s and 1980s were turbulent times in the Los Angeles legal profession. Law firms were growing dramatically in size while at the same time, costs were accelerating and competition for quality work was growing. Many larger East Coast firms opened offices in Los Angeles, searching for local talent. So in 1987, when the Kadison firm dissolved, the New York firm of Rogers & Wells snapped up the then-experienced trial and appellate lawyer. Tom later affiliated with Bryan Cave and Manatt, Phelps & Philips before moving his practice to the Imperial Valley. There he joined the San Diego firm of Shanks & Herbert. In 2003, Tom opened his own office in Palm Desert where he practiced until his passing on June 30, 2021.

Tom was an excellent trial and appellate lawyer, named as a fellow by the highly selective American College of Trial Lawyers. His enviable client list included United Airlines, Pan American World Airways, Packard Bell,

Baskin Robbins, IBM, Ford Motor Company, Pfizer, and Warner Bros, along with many others. That he was still practicing law full time at 90 says something about his skills and judgment. He clearly enjoyed the practice of law. We generally enjoy doing that at which we excel.

Finally, one of Tom's most outstanding qualities was the extraordinary amount of time he devoted to public service, both to his profession and his community. His work on the CSCHS Board was no exception. During his long tenure on the board, particularly in his early days, he served on the finance and membership committees, among others. Tom was always a fellow with lots of good ideas and good energy.

Tom was also active in the UCLA Law Alumni Association and served as its president. Those of us who knew him as a young lawyer remember his work with the Junior Barristers of the Los Angeles County Bar Association. He was a founder and later president of the Association of Business Trial Lawyers and chaired the Litigation Section of the State Bar of California. He also was active in federal bar activities. For his work with the Lawyer Representatives Coordinating Committee of the Ninth Circuit Judicial Council and the Ninth Circuit Advisory Board, he was he was honored with the John Frank Award in 2009, given each year for dedication to the law, outstanding character and service to the Ninth Circuit.

Beyond the legal community, Tom helped found the Los Angeles Opera Company and served on the Board of the Los Angeles Music Center Performing Arts Council. He was also a member of and served as president of the La Quinta Rotary Club. An accomplished amateur magician, Tom was at one time a member of the Magic Castle in Hollywood.

Tom was a good friend to all of us and a loyal member of our board. We will miss him. ★

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Thomas J. McDermott, Jr.
Photo: McDermott Family.