

Justice Edward Panelli, 1931–2024

JUSTICE EDWARD A. PANELLI, who as a child worked alongside his parents in Santa Clara county’s agricultural fields and rose to become an associate justice of the California Supreme Court, died on July 21st. He was 92.

Justice Panelli served on the high court from 1985 to 1994 following his appointment by Gov. George Deukmejian. The period was marked by a shift from the Rose Bird-led court to one with a majority of Republican appointees.

“Justice Edward Panelli served with honor and integrity over a long legal career and as a distinguished member of our California Supreme Court,” Chief Justice Patricia Guerrero said in a prepared statement. “His unwavering commitment to justice and fairness was rooted in his humble upbringing as the child of immigrants, earning him the respect and admiration of his colleagues and the broader legal community.”

He graduated at the top of his class from what is now Santa Clara University School of Law. For the next 17 years, he practiced with his cousin, handling whatever came in the door.

He commenced his judicial career on the Santa Clara County Superior Court following his 1972 appointment by Gov. Ronald Reagan. In 1983, Gov. Deukmejian appointed him to the Court of Appeal, where he served until the governor elevated him to the high court.



Italian was Edward Panelli’s first language. Born during the Depression, his parents toiled in the fields and packing sheds. They saw a legal career as Panelli’s route out of poverty. In a series of interviews conducted in 2005 and 2006 and published in the *California Legal History*, he told historian Laura McCreery, “from the time I was probably 7 or 8 years old they said, ‘We want you to be a lawyer,’ so there was never any choice.”

Justice Panelli credited his hardscrabble childhood with giving him valuable insight. “I may not be Oliver Wendell Holmes, but ... I know how [people] hurt and why they hurt,” he told *West Magazine* in 1986. “I’ve got a much broader feel of the world than if I’d come from a cloistered or protected environment.”

Justice Panelli might be best known for his opinions related to the insurance industry and its duty to defend clients. Following his retirement from the California Supreme Court, he joined JAMS (Judicial Arbitration and Mediation Services). He is survived by his sons, Tom, Jeff and Mike, and three grandchildren. His wife, Lorna, passed away in 2019.

The California Supreme Court Historical Society published a slightly condensed version of Justice Panelli’s oral history in 2022.¹ ★

1. “Oral History of Justice Edward Panelli,” 17 *Cal. Legal Hist.* (2022) 406.