

Judicial Profile Joseph P. Metzger
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Joseph P. Metzger will always have a place in the history of the Palm Beach County Bar Association. He will stand tall in our memories as a former Circuit Judge, a lawyer's lawyer, and a friend to many. We grieve we will no longer have his dignified presence. When I think of Joe, my thoughts go back to 1964. That was almost 30 years ago and was an interesting legal year in Palm Beach County. That was the year the insurance carriers first attempted to break the Jones, Paine and Foster stronghold on the insurance defense practice. The carriers in Jacksonville sent in Bob Montgomery; I joined him and Mrs. Tucker later that year. Miami's Walton Lantaff sent up a partner, Joe Metzger, to represent State Farm. These out-of-town legal outposts were convened in the Pan-Am Building, across from the old Courthouse, before it was "wrapped 'round."

So, who exactly was this Miami lawyer, Joe Metzger, who came to town in 1964? Much of the following information was from his widow, Betty; his lovely daughter, Elizabeth; and his long-time secretary, Delores.

Joe's mother and father were originally from Ohio, west of Pittsburgh. They moved to Miami in 1948 because of his father's health. His family believed Joe brought with him his Midwestern and German work ethic. And his Catholic upbringing was important. He had eight brothers and sisters.

He was the Salutatorian of his high school in North Miami. But there was no money to go to college. Joe went back to Ohio to work in a steel mill for a year. It was tough saving money. He joined the Navy. For three years, he was a radio operator in a Navy blimp. Well, there was only one really good result: the Korean War G.I. Bill. But the college? Joe chose a small Catholic school in Maryland: Mount St. Mary's College. One thousand male Catholic students. His family believed he had chosen this college because he was considering entering a religious order; but he changed his mind. This college was next door to Betty's college, an even smaller Catholic college with 200 female students. They met as freshman, and they would be married four years later after their graduation. Joe was an achiever. He was the Valedictorian.

In 1956, on to the University of Miami Law School. Betty got a job as a legal secretary to Sam Powers (Blackwell, Walker and Gray). Joe was an insurance adjuster for Liberty Mutual by day and a student by night.

He graduated from Law School in 1961. Joe was always an achiever. He was Editor-in-Chief of the Miami Law Review. And soon he went to work for Walton-Lantaff in Miami. Then the move to West Palm Beach, and that brings us to 1964. The Walton-Lantaff branch office got larger and larger. Then, in 1969, Joe suddenly decided he wanted to be a Circuit Judge. It wasn't the money. Being a judge paid \$28,000.00. What was it?

His wife and children even today don't have the answer for this. A career move? We all knew it was not along-term goal. Finally the economic pressures on a Judge's salary became too great. Kathleen had been born in 1958, Ann in 1960; Elizabeth in 1962; Joe, Jr. in 1963; and Tom in 1966. Five children on a Judge's pay in 1972 was an economic hardship. Joe decided to leave the Bench.

Then occurred a strange 18-month marriage. The "Ronnie and Joe" (Sales and Metzger) partnership. But that, too, ended. Back to Walton-Lantaff. Then a split, leaving with Bonnie and three others to form his own firm in 1983. But always the same work theme: health-care issues, defense of hospitals, doctors, and complex issue trials. A prepared obituary stated Joe had participated in over 500 trials as a Judge and lawyer.

But what about Joe, the man? While the rest of us were sleeping, he got up at 5:00 A.M., put on his jogging outfit, and jogged to his office. He worked for an hour going through his mail, dictating. Then home for breakfast and a swim. Back to the office until 6:00 P.M. Home for dinner. Then complex work at the dining room table from 8:00 P.M. to 10:00 P.M. That was a workday that averaged 17 hours.

Former Judge William Rutter, Joe's neighbor and law partner, said in a newspaper statement after his death that Joe's first love was his family. Delores, his secretary since 1962, had this to say: "Mr. Metzger was a dignified person. He was also a very busy person. First, there were his clients; the phone rang constantly. Managing a law firm of 35 persons took a real effort. Then, there were so many Bar Committee and associations he was involved in, he kept one secretary busy doing only that."

Then, I asked Betty and Elizabeth what hi real love was, they could easily reply "the law". Elizabeth has written that her father did have other interests. She related the following: "Roses- He loved and planted dozens of rose plants and frequently on Saturdays would buy and plant new roses plants and tend those he already had. At times, he's cut some of his roses and bring them to us in the office.

Music-He loved classical music, and also piano renditions, George Winston and Danny Wright. He had a CD in his back office at MS&R, and always enjoyed listening to music all over the house.

Books- He had hundreds of books he collected-would frequently browse old book stores in cities and towns he visited and always bring home several books-old as well as new."

In all our lives, we toil many hours in the fields of the law; and we each love our families, our friends, and our law firms. We know someday this will all end. And when one of us dies, we all die a little. And when Joe died in September, we all died a little, and it hurts. He was one of the best there ever was. So goodbye, Joe, we'll miss you.