William L. Dwyer Outstanding Jurist: Sharon S. Armstrong

By Judge Ann Schindler

The William L. Dwyer Outstanding Jurist Award recognizes Judge Sharon Stewart Armstrong’s extraordinary 27-year career as a Superior Court judge and leader committed to improving the court system to ensure the just and timely resolution of cases.

Since her appointment to the bench in 1985, lawyers have consistently ranked Judge Armstrong as one of the top King County Superior Court judges. A brilliant, gracious and efficient judge, attorneys relished the opportunity to try a case in her court.

Civil litigator Jeff Tilden says, “She’s terrific. It was a pleasure to try a case in Judge Armstrong’s court; it made me proud to be a lawyer. Even when Judge Armstrong ruled against me, I knew she worked hard, carefully thought about it and made the decision based on the law.”

Washington State Association for Justice President Rebecca Roe was always impressed with the innovative techniques Judge Armstrong used in civil cases to help jurors understand the case. “Judge Armstrong loved the craft of presiding over jury trials and enhancing the experience for everyone,” Roe said.

In criminal cases, King County Prosecuting Attorney Dan Satterberg said Judge Armstrong “gained widespread admiration within the Prosecuting Attorney’s Office for the way she conducted her courtroom. A trial assignment to her courtroom was viewed as a lucky draw by deputy prosecutors. As a sentencing judge, she could be tough when she needed to be, and show mercy when it was appropriate.”

Criminal defense attorney Robert Flennaugh agreed. “Jury trials can be stressful for attorneys,” he said. “But I always enjoyed being in front of Judge Armstrong. Without fail, Judge Armstrong would treat my client and me with fairness and respect.”

Judge Armstrong, who retired from the bench earlier this year, sought to improve the experience of jurors and the litigants, and was a pioneer in allowing jurors to take notes and ask questions in civil cases. Judge Armstrong worked to make the jury instructions not only accurate, but comprehensible.

Judge William Downing said that “with her combined gifts of intellect and temperament, Sharon was a truly phenomenal trial judge — one of the best ever seen in these parts. I know this from talking to attorneys and I know it from discussing my own cases with her. I also know it from watching her in action at our monthly Washington Practice Jury Instructions Committee meetings for over a decade.

“Inside that conference room, she would listen attentively as high-powered lawyers and judges expressed divergent and passionate views on the conundrum of the month. Then, just when we seemed at an impasse, she would brighten up and say ‘This is good; this is really helpful!’ and proceed to magically locate the common ground and lead the room to a consensus where seemingly none had existed.”

Judge Armstrong served in a number of leadership positions on the court, including chief civil judge, chief asbestos judge and chief criminal judge, as well as a member of the Executive Committee for many years. According to Judge Palmer Robinson, Judge Armstrong “was instrumental in the work done on the court’s strategic planning and an important member of the effort to develop and implement internal performance measures. Judge Armstrong could be counted on to find out what innovations courts in other parts of the country were making and bring the best of those innovations back to King County, improve them, and then implement them.”

Case management was one of Judge Armstrong’s passions. Shortly after joining the bench, Judge Armstrong and two other judges assumed responsibility for managing civil cases to help jurors understand the case. “Judge Armstrong loved the craft of presiding over jury trials and enhancing the experience for everyone,” Roe said.

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Beginning in 1987, Judge Armstrong worked with members of the bar as co-chair of the Backlog Reduction Subcommittee of the Delay Reduction Task Force. At the time, the court had 75,000 pending civil cases with an average time to trial of 3½
years. The delay reduction effort resulted in the adoption of new court rules for case management, the successful reduction in the backlog, and a case management system that is viewed by many as one of the most successful models in managing civil cases.

Judge Armstrong’s dedication to case management was critical to that success. As King County Superior Court Chief Administrative Officer Paul Sherfey explains, “Good case flow management practices are at the heart of assuring justice in our court system, and Judge Armstrong’s consistent leadership of the King County Superior Court bench in case flow principles and practice set a very high bar. “Working with national experts, she fully schooled herself in the most promising practices nationwide, then proceeded to instill in our own court these same expectations. Our court and community have significantly benefited from Judge Armstrong’s case flow management leadership.”

And according to Department of Judicial Administration Director and Superior Court Clerk Barbara Miner, “Judge Armstrong clearly believed in and focused much of her career on leading the King County Superior Court in implementation of the American Bar Association Standard on Delay Reduction” to eliminate unnecessary delay in the resolution of cases. “Most recently she was the lead judge on a major project to reduce the time from filing to trial in the court’s most prevalent civil case schedule,” Miner said. “This project included extensive data analysis and stakeholder outreach. Its successful adoption by the court is a testament to Judge Armstrong’s knowledge and leadership skills, and the trust she has with her fellow judicial officers.”

During her tenure as chief criminal judge, Judge Armstrong and other stakeholders reviewed criminal case management practices. As a member of the committee representing the defense bar, Flennaugh was struck by her passion and determination. “Behind Judge Armstrong’s calm disposition was a fierce leader,” he said. “She was not afraid to challenge the status quo to improve the criminal justice system.”

As Judge John Erlick so aptly observed, “Sharon has always shown passion for her work, dedication to the bench and true compassion for others. Our bench was a better place because of her as is the community at large.”

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