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Former city attorney leaves community legacy

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Abstract (Summary)

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Full Text (1324 words)

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Jerry King, pictured here shortly before he retired in 1994, served as Vancouver's city attorney for almost three decades. He also was active in civic affairs.

Jerry King, who spent almost three decades as the city of Vancouver's top attorney and remained active in community affairs during his retirement, died Wednesday. He was 76.

King came to Vancouver in April 1965, when the city's population was 38,000, less than one-fourth its current size of 163,000.

Shortly before King retired in May 1994, he told of leaving his post as an assistant city attorney in Seattle to be Vancouver's first full-time city attorney.

After pulling into a Vancouver motel and going for a walk, King bought a newspaper. An editorial, headlined "You Can't Blame the Gentlemen for Getting out of City Hall," discussed the recent resignations of the part-time city attorney and assistant city attorney and depicted a city government in shambles.

"I was a little concerned," King admitted. "But I was 32, and I thought it would be a challenge. I wasn't looking for a safe harbor to float around in."

Turns out that Vancouver found a safe harbor in King. For 29 years, he was a stabilizing force and a City Hall institution, a man known for his sharp legal insight, his level-headed perspective and his rumpled sports jackets.

His legacy also includes a strong commitment to public service, a lifelong love of books and libraries, and staunch support for civil liberties.

"As a boss, he led by example," said Judy Zeider, an assistant city attorney who has worked for Vancouver since 1981. "He was very particular about the work product that came out of the office and was a wonderful mentor. As a person, just very kind and caring and generous."

Ted Gathe, who succeeded King as city attorney, spent five years as King's top assistant attorney.

"He had a keen legal mind, a great wit," Gathe said. "He was highly respected with his colleagues throughout the state in municipal law."

King was born in Ferndale on Oct. 1, 1932. He met his wife, the former Dona Mae Parvey, on his 21st birthday. The couple were married from 1955 until her death in 1995.

King is survived by one son, Quentin King, and his partner, Glen Kriekenbeck, both of Seattle; two sisters, Belle King Weninger of Vancouver and Ilene King Cummings of Toronto, Ontario; and his companion in recent years, Gretchen Starke of Vancouver.

King earned a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Washington, followed by a law degree from the university.

He served in the Army during the 1950s, stationed in Puerto Rico.

During his early years with the city of Vancouver, King was the only attorney and had to be a legal jack of all trades.

"I would do all the criminal prosecution Wednesday afternoons," he said in 1994. "It sounds like I started in the Middle Ages, but we had no probation programs, or programs for battered women or jury trials for district court. We didn't have all the growth management and environmental regulations, or the unions or personal injury suits."

King worked for five city managers and nine mayors. He tried 25 civil cases, but most of his time was spent supervising the office and writing 2,535 legal opinions for the city council.

Pivotal role

He played a pivotal role in Vancouver establishing a utility tax on water and sewer customers, even for those who live outside the city limits but receive services. When the tax was litigated all the way to the Washington Supreme Court, King and the city prevailed.

King represented the city in seven cases that were argued before the state Supreme Court and lost only one, in the late 1980s when former Police Chief Leland Davis challenged his firing.

But King was more than the city's legal brain. He joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's Vancouver branch early during his tenure at City Hall and received the Val Joshua Racial Justice Award in 1993. He also served on the Council for the Homeless board of directors and was active in the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship.

Mark Gallagher, minister of the Michael Servetus Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, said King was a modest man who warmly greeted newcomers to the congregation.

"I would say he was probably the most beloved member of our community," Gallagher said. "He served in various leadership positions as well. He knew just about everyone in the congregation, and everyone knew him, a very affirming, warm presence."

Brian Willoughby, a former Columbian reporter and the church's current president, said King's death is a loss for the entire community.

"He was kind, good-hearted and an ardent supporter of civil rights and civil liberties," Willoughby said. "He also had an ability to disagree with a deep sense of civility, something too often lacking in political discourse. I'll miss him terribly."

Fight for rights

Throughout his life, King remained a strong advocate for equal rights. He drafted a city diversity policy to protect minority employees. In the early 1990s, he was one of the founders of the Southwest Washington chapter of Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays.

Willoughby said King helped many families deal with the coming out of a gay or lesbian child and worked to make the Unitarian Fellowship welcoming for all people, regardless of sexual orientation.

When Vancouver and Clark County decided to set up a local human rights commission in 2001, opponents questioned if the commission would duplicate services already provided by the state and become a tribunal for political correctness. They gathered enough signatures to force an election using the city's referendum process. Supporters turned to King to lead the campaign to retain the rights panel, but voters killed it by better than a 2-1 ratio.

Books and libraries also were lifelong priorities. King's second term on the Fort Vancouver Regional Library District's board of directors was set to expire at the end of this year. King, who had been diagnosed with colon cancer, was still attending library board meetings in late October, even as his health was failing.

According to the library's Web site, King would visit the Vancouver Community Library three days a week during his lunch hour while working at City Hall. He could remember the first book he checked out from a library, "Muggins Mouse" by Marjorie Barrows, when the future attorney was only 4 years old.

Merle Koplan, who served with King on the library board, remembered her colleague as "a true, dedicated library supporter."

"He had just really good values and good morals when it came to the library," Koplan said.

King was an immense fan of Walt Whitman, but it wasn't until King retired that he began devoting so much of his home's space to the celebrated American poet. He accumulated more than 600 books by and about Whitman. He also attended Whitman conferences and visited historical sites.

"I do find them to be very beautiful objects," King said of his books in 2006, "so I like to arrange them on the shelves and show them off."

King recently made arrangements to donate his Whitman collection to the University of Iowa. King met Ed Folsom, who oversees the university's Whitman scholarship program and edits the *Walt Whitman Quarterly*, at a conference a few years ago. King, as his health declined, contacted Folsom about finding a permanent home for his Whitman books, and Folsom agreed to keep them together as the "Jerry King Whitman Collection."

The Vancouver City Council held a moment of silence Monday night to remember King. Said Mayor Pro Tem Pat Jollota, "The city of Vancouver has lost a champion."

If you go

What: Memorial service for Jerry King. When: 2 p.m. Dec. 12. Where: Gaiser Hall at Clark College. Memorials: Contributions in Kings name can be made to the Fort Vancouver Regional Library Foundation or to Michael Servetus Unitarian Universalist Fellowship.

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