

[This article first appeared in the August 2010 *Maricopa Lawyer*. Justice Ryan died suddenly Jan. 30, 2012 of an apparent heart attack at the age of 66. He is survived by his wife Karen, three sons, and two grandchildren.]

A Supreme Court Send Off

Justice Michael Ryan Leaving Arizona Supreme Court, Plans to Stay Active Helping the Legal and Education Communities

By Laura Swendseid

Since 2002, the Arizona Supreme Court is where Justice Michael Ryan has spent many of his days. On August 6, after 24 years as a judge, Ryan will lay down his gavel.

Justice Ryan, who turned 65 on Aug. 3, is the most experienced of the justices, having been a prosecutor, a Superior Court judge, and an Appeals Court judge. As a Superior Court judge, Ryan presided over several high-profile trials, including AzScam, the Phoenix Suns' drug trial in 1987, and the 1988 felony trial of former Arizona Gov. Evan Meacham.

At the Maricopa County Bar Association, Justice Ryan, served on the Board of Directors for several years and continued his involvement through a number of other activities.

Justice Ryan received his B.A. degree from St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota, in 1967. After graduation, Ryan was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps and served as an infantry platoon commander in Viet Nam. He was wounded twice within five months, the second confining him to a wheelchair. For his service, Ryan was awarded two Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star with a Combat "V" for heroism in combat.

Justice Ryan came to Arizona in 1970 and began graduate studies in English. However, he later obtained his JD from Arizona State University Law School in 1977.

In 1978, Justice Ryan began his career as a prosecutor for the Maricopa County Attorney, and he was one of the few Supreme Court justices with experience as a trial court judge. In 1986 he was appointed to the Maricopa County Superior Court, he moved to the Arizona Court of Appeals in 1996, and in 2002 then-Gov. Jane Hull appointed him to the Arizona Supreme Court.

Ryan said he's not tired of his job but felt that now was time to say goodbye and join his wife, Karen, a former occupational therapist, in retirement. From 1974 through 2000, the couple cared for more than 80 high risk infants prior to their placement for adoption or return to their birth parent or parents.

"I can't say I'm tired of it because it's very interesting work. I just felt it was the right time for me. I think you have to make a decision sometime. If you delay it too long or if you keep going on, after a while, I think for some people, it may affect their work. I can't say – I hope it hasn't happened to me at this point. I want to avoid that," he said.

“There is still much to be done, including maintaining a well-functioning court amid severe budget cuts that have made it difficult to fill positions.” Ryan said the court has been “cut to the bone.” Despite the challenges, he credited Chief Justice Rebecca White Berch and former Chief Justice Ruth McGregor with presenting the legislature detailed fiscal plans that provided best options for budgetary cuts. The goal is to do the same for fiscal year 2011-2012.

Berch said she is proud to have served alongside the retiring justice. “Arizona is losing a wonderful judge who is thoughtful, patient, courageous, and kind. He is a quiet, considerate colleague, who has a wonderful sense of humor and has been an absolute pleasure to work with. It has been an honor to serve with him.”

Though Ryan may be stepping down from the bench, he said he intends to stay active in the legal community. Currently he is on the Maricopa County Bar Association’s Diversity Committee and serves on the State Bar Task Force on Persons with Disabilities in the Legal Profession. He has also volunteered as a judge for the Arizona High School Mock Trial Program, sponsored by the Arizona Foundation for Legal Services and Education for more than 15 years.

Ryan said he really wants to reach out to young people, including high school and law school students, and help them develop the skills needed to be successful in the legal field. Recently, he was spotted at the Summer Social, sponsored by the MCBA, which brought together interns, externs, and prospective and new attorneys with seasoned lawyers and judges. The purpose of the annual event is to help further the attorneys’ and students’ careers and opportunities in the field.

When asked what Ryan was most proud of professionally, the justice answered that he hopes he did the best job he could for the state and the judicial system. For those who are studying to be lawyers and judges, or already are, Ryan said he offers these words of advice:

“Be professional. Be civil. Be honest. Integrity is so important. Once you lose your credibility you have a real problem with other lawyers and with judges.”

HONORS AND ACTIVITIES:

Awards:

2001 - Received the **Honorable Henry S. Stevens Judge of the Year Award** from the Maricopa County Bar Association and the **Judicial Award of Excellence** from the Public Lawyers Section of the Arizona State Bar

2002 - Received the **Committee on Minorities and Women in the Law Award** from the State Bar's Committee on Minorities and Women in the Law

2003 - Received the **Arizona State University College of Law Outstanding Alumnus Award** and the **Distinguished Achievement Award**

2005 - Received the State Bar’s **James Walsh Outstanding Jurist Award**

Volunteer Work:

--**1987 to 1991** and **1997 to 2002** - Served as a member of the **Board of Directors** of the Maricopa County Bar Association.

--Volunteered as a judge for the **Arizona High School Mock Trial Program** for 15 years.

--**Present** - Member of the Maricopa County Bar Association's **Diversity Committee**; serves on the State Bar **Task Force on Persons with Disabilities in the Legal Profession** and chairs the **Arizona Supreme Court's Capital Case Oversight Committee**.