

2011 Lifetime Achievement Award

Jerome Wolf

Jerome (Jerry) Wolf is the 2011 recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award, which recognizes individuals who have demonstrated a lifetime of outstanding service to improving the development and growth of the law, the administration of justice, and the increased recognition of the contributions of the legal profession to the welfare of society. This award will be presented at the 127th Annual Meeting on December 9, 2011. (see page 10 for registration form)

Jerome (Jerry) Wolf has been one of the foremost litigators in Kansas City since he arrived in town in 1966 after service in the Army. After 28 years with Spencer Fane Britt & Browne, from 1966 to 1994, Jerry co-founded the Kansas City office of Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal, now SNR Denton, and was managing partner of that office from its founding to 2001. He has been a litigator for his entire career, with a special focus in the areas of alternative dispute resolution, of which he was an early practitioner.

Jerry came to Kansas City after a childhood in Minnesota. He was born and raised in the southern Minnesota town of Austin, home to the Hormel Corporation. Jerry tells the story that three important births took place in Austin in 1937: the births of Jerry Wolf, John Madden (the football coach and TV personality), and Spam (remember, Hormel is headquartered in Austin). Jerry's father owned the town's furniture store.

After graduating second in his class from Austin High School, Jerry took the train to New Haven, Connecticut, where he was to be a freshman at Yale University. Never having been to New Haven, he got off the train and spotted a young man wearing horn-rimmed glasses and, concluding from his worldly dress that he was a Yale senior, Jerry approached him and asked, "Where's the Yale campus?" From that inauspicious



introduction to Yale,

Jerry Wolf as a child in Austin, Minnesota and also serving in the military

Jerry formed a life-long love for that college. Both of his children have attended Yale, and it forms the center of a life of inquiry and education. But Jerry had plenty of fun at Yale, as demonstrated by the many amusing stories about road trips to New England women's colleges, and the precarious rides back to New Haven.

Jerry must have done reasonably well at Yale (in fact, he graduated Phi Beta Kappa),

because he continued his education at the Harvard Law School, which he entered in the fall of 1959 and from which he graduated in 1962. Again, Jerry tells many stories of cliff-hanging trips to women's colleges, but the fact of which he is most proud is that in the fall of 1960 he attended the Red Sox game at Fenway Park in which Ted Williams made his last appearance and, in his final at-bat, hit a home run. Jerry remembers that Williams rounded the bases and, true to form, refused to come out of the dugout to acknowledge the fans' farewell ovation.

Knowing that military service was a near certainty, Jerry volunteered for the draft and served on active duty in the Army from October, 1962 to June, 1966. He entered as an enlisted man, but when someone discovered that he had a law degree from Harvard, it was decided that he would be more useful as a JAG lawyer than a rifle-toting infantryman. After JAG training, Jerry served at Ft. Leonard Wood in outstate Missouri, where he defended soldiers against charges ranging from petty theft to homicide. In the spring of 1964 he was ordered to Camp McCoy in Wisconsin to set up a court-martial system, but his most important accomplishment while in Wisconsin was to negotiate a deal with the state so that it would not tax the cheap alcohol the Army was shipping from Chicago, thus preserving dime martinis and margaritas at the Officers' Club.

To negotiate that deal, Jerry had to go

to Madison several times, where his cousin introduced him to a University of Wisconsin senior, Ellen Lopinsky. A few months after they met, she accepted Jerry's proposal (as Jerry remembers, on the same night that the Beatles appeared in a rerun of the Ed Sullivan Show). Jerry and Ellen have been married for 47 years. She's the best partner Jerry has had, law or otherwise.

Upon his discharge from the Army, Jerry took a job at Spencer Fane Britt & Browne in Kansas City. He had grown to like Kansas City as a youngster, when he visited relatives there. During his career at Spencer Fane, Jerry served as a managing partner and chaired the litigation group. Among other cases, Jerry handled some of the first Superfund cases in the United States for a prominent firm client, AT&T. He tried cases "all over the lot," including a 10(b)(5) securities fraud case and an admiralty claim. It was accurate to say about Jerry that "his ire's for hire."

When Spencer Fane moved from the Power & Light Building to the Commerce Bank Building in 1986, Jerry had the firm incorporate into its new offices a conference room large enough to accommodate the firm's entire partnership. That conference room was referred to as "The Wolf Dome" for the balance of Jerry's tenure with Spencer Fane.

In 1994, Jerry took up a new challenge: starting a law office from scratch. With two younger partners, Dave Gatchell and Mark Johnson, Jerry opened the Sonnenschein office in Kansas City, which are now located in the American Century Towers near the Country Club Plaza.

Jerry served as managing partner of the Sonnenschein office until 2001. During his tenure Jerry was responsible for growing the office from 3 lawyers to over 50. In his 17 years with Sonnenschein (now SNR Denton, after its combination with an English law firm), Jerry has continued to practice law actively, trying antitrust, environmental, construction, and commercial cases.

Jerry has been deeply involved in the community since his arrival in Kansas City. He has twice chaired the Kansas City chapter of the Jewish Community Relations Bureau/American Jewish Committee, and has served on the boards of the Jewish Community Center, Jewish Children's and Family Services, and Temple B'Nai Jehudah. He has chaired the Friends of Chamber Music, which won the Chamber Music of America National Award. While his children were in school, he was chairman of Pembroke Hill's Athletics Committee. (Jerry is an athlete himself; who doesn't remember his early morning runs on Belinder, wearing his horse collar? His running style was unmistakable, even in the dark). Consistent with his long involvement with Yale, Jerry has been an alumni representative of Yale and was president of Yale's Kansas City Alumni Club.

But he is proudest professionally of his pro bono work, which continues to today. In the past five years Jerry has handled two complex death penalty/habeas corpus cases in the Alabama state and federal courts, and recently won a remarkable decision at the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals, negating the death penalty for a mentally-challenged inmate. Jerry's article about that case will be published next spring in the Criminal Law Bulletin. Jerry also handles numerous disability benefits appeals for Vietnam Veterans



Jerry Wolf surrounded by his family

suffering from post-traumatic stress. Despite the difficulties presented in winning those cases, Jerry recently obtained disability benefits for a veteran who badly needed them.

Jerry has been active in bar association affairs from the inception of his Kansas City legal career. He was the first chair of the KCMBA's Young Lawyers Group, barely five years after coming to Kansas City. Jerry was president of the KCMBA in 1979 and in recent years has undertaken a project to personally interview all past presidents of the KCMBA on DVD. He founded the Kansas City Bar Foundation and received the Foundation's legacy award. Along with U.S. District Judge Fernando Gaitan, Jerry founded the Federal Courts Advocates Section. He has helped run the Justice for All Campaign on behalf of Legal Aid of Western Missouri, and received the Legal Aid President's Award for his efforts. He is presently supervising a pro bono project in the SNR Denton office involving legal aid to Joplin residents whose homes were destroyed in the recent tornado. In 1991 he chaired the Civil Justice Reform Act Committee that recommended the adoption of the Early Assessment Program and telephone conferences with judges before the filing of motions to compel in discovery disputes. Both programs are still going strong, 20 years later.

Jerry's proudest personal accomplishment is his family. Ellen has been with him for, well, a long time, and Jerry's children, Margo and Greg, are both lawyers with (of course) Yale degrees. Margo practices with Vedder Price in Chicago and Greg is with SNR Denton in Kansas City. Jerry spends considerable time going to his four grandchildren's soccer and flag football games, and he has begun to travel internationally (recent trips to Spain and China). Through all of that, Jerry has applied his favorite saying, "Every day is a triumph." □



About the Author

Mark Johnson concentrates in the areas of communications, media, and employment relations. One of the three founders of the firm's Kansas City office, Mr. Johnson is a member of the firm's Communications Regulatory and Labor and Employment practices. He is also a member of the Firm's Policy and Planning Committee.