

State's 'consummate public servant' dies

Sandra Gardebring Ogren served on the Supreme Court and in many other state government roles. She had battled cancer for nine years.

By BOB VON STERNBERG and JIM ADAMS, Star Tribune staff writers
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SANDRA S. GARDEBRING OGREN

Born June 15, 1947, Bismarck, N.D.

Luther College (B.A., 1969); University of Minnesota Law School (J.D., 1973; law review)

Special assistant attorney general (1973-77)

Commissioner, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (1977-79; 1982-84)

Director, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Region 5 enforcement division (1979-82)

Chair, Metropolitan Council (1984-86)

Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Human Services (1986-89)

Minnesota Court of Appeals (1989-91)

Minnesota Supreme Court, (1991-1998.)

Source: Minnesota State Law Library



Sandra Gardebring Ogren

Sandra Gardebring Ogren was a powerful, ubiquitous presence in Minnesota state government, its judiciary and higher education for more than three decades.

The former state Supreme Court Justice died Tuesday after a long battle with cancer. She was 63.

"She was absolutely committed to the idea that the public sector was honorable and important," said her husband, Paul Ogren. "She had opportunities to go into the private sector, where she

could have made a lot more money, but that never interested her. She believed there were ways to work together collectively to solve things."

Following her rich record of public service in Minnesota, she was recruited in 2004 to become vice president for advancement at California Polytechnic State University, where she retired last month.

"She'd been ill on and off with an obscure form of cancer for about nine years," her husband said. "But she loved her work and never let [cancer] interfere with her professionalism. Her boundless energy just got reduced to the point where she had to choose."

Gov. Rudy Perpich appointed Gardebring Ogren to the Supreme Court during his last days in office in 1991.

"She was very close to Governor Perpich and was one of his great administrators," said A.M. "Sandy" Keith. Keith, chief justice during her seven years on the court, noted Perpich had appointed her as commissioner of the Pollution Control Agency (PCA), head of the Metropolitan Council and then Human Services commissioner.

Perpich "was a great believer in women leaders," Keith said, noting Perpich appointed three of the four women justices that gave Minnesota the first female-majority Supreme Court in the country.

Jay Kiedrowski was finance commissioner and a member of Perpich's Cabinet with Gardebring Ogren when she was a commissioner." She had a lot of energy and was creative in thinking about public issues," he said. She was part of a strong cast of women leaders Perpich chose, including Lt. Gov. Marlene Johnson and Health Commissioner Sister Mary Ashton, he said.

"They really excelled and it demonstrated the great role women could play in public service," Kiedrowski said. "She was one of those early talented women leaders that really carved the path for future women leaders."

Justice Paul Anderson, who served with Gardebring Ogren, said she was very bright, perceptive and passionate about several issues, including consumer rights and juvenile justice. She led the revision of juvenile court rules. In certain cases, the change allows extended court jurisdiction over juveniles until they are 21 if they follow sentencing conditions. If they don't comply, the case is referred for adult sentencing, he said.

"She very much believed that government has a proper role to make things better for people," Anderson said. "She was a consummate public servant."

She was recruited in 1998, at age 51, to become vice president for institutional relations at the University of Minnesota and was a close adviser to President Mark Yudof. She said at the time that life as a justice was challenging, but cloistered and lonesome. "I miss being out in public life, of being in contact with people and being in the problem-solving business," she said.

At the university, the North Dakota native managed legislative lobbying, fund raising and communications. University general counsel Mark Rotenberg said he worked closely with her and Yudof.

"Mark Yudof and I are both attorneys so we greatly valued Sandy's judgment and can-do attitude," he said. One of the first publicity issues she faced was the finding of widespread academic misconduct, including tutor-prepared papers for men's basketball players, that led to the departure of coach Clem Haskins. The Haskins flap "was a very serious challenge that she helped us through," Rotenberg said.

Gardebring and Ogren met when she was state commissioner of human services and he chaired the state House committee that had oversight of her department.

"Initially, we were at loggerheads, banging heads because she wanted to deinstitutionalize people and I represented Moose Lake [home of a state treatment center]," Ogren said. "She was trying to do the humane thing and made me realize I was being parochial."

She hadn't planned to make the move to Cal Poly until she got an unsolicited job offer in 2004 from the president. The school is in San Luis Obispo, where she and Ogren already owned a home and had planned to retire.

Reflecting on the current state of higher education and its perennial financial woes nationwide, she said in a June interview on Minnesota Public Radio that "legislators in particular have lost sight of the public value of higher education" as state support for colleges and universities has dwindled.

Ogren called his wife "the kindest person I've ever known. Most people remember her as a professional, but I'll always remember her wonderful booming laugh. I spent the last 21 years with her and every moment was interesting."

Gardebring Ogren also is survived by her stepchildren, Samuel and Shana. Services will be held at Mount Carmel Lutheran Church in San Luis Obispo, Calif., on Aug. 7.