

M. Jeanne Coyne, who served on state Supreme Court from 1982-96, dies at 71

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In her 14 years as an associate justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court, Mary Jeanne Coyne was best known for her insurance law expertise, for her influence on family law and for writing concise legal opinions.

Coyne, the second woman named to the state's highest court, served from 1982 until she retired in 1996. She died of cancer Thursday in her home in Edina at age 71.

A lawyer who specialized in appellate practice in areas such as contracts and statutory liability, Coyne argued more than 100 cases before the state Supreme Court before she became a member. She engaged in business law, including corporate and pension planning, estate planning, wills and real estate.

"She was a very strong woman, a top legal mind," said retired Chief Justice Douglas Amdahl, who headed the court when Coyne was appointed in 1982. "She loved the law and studied it and examined it."

Amdahl, who knew Coyne for 30 years, said she was a brilliant lawyer, a good debater and a gifted writer. She was a cautious woman who did not "go jumping off into new fields of endeavor," he said.

Coyne, who attended the University of Minnesota Law School, practiced law from 1957 to 1982 as a member of Meagher, Geer, Markham, Anderson, Adamson, Flaskamp & Brennan of Minneapolis.

"She didn't always agree with me, but we had some wonderful discussions," said retired Chief Justice A.M. (Sandy) Keith. He said they spoke recently about how much she enjoyed mentoring young female attorneys.

In the courtroom, Coyne was known for grilling lawyers on case history and previous decisions. "She had her own style - she was kind of crusty," said Keith. "She could be very hard on lawyers who didn't know what they were talking about."

When she wasn't in court, Coyne loved to play golf, listen to classical music and sing in a choir, said retired Justice Rosalie Wahl. Wahl, the first woman appointed to the court, said she was grateful for a female colleague, and enjoyed talking to Coyne over tea.

"She came on there with all sorts of qualifications, and being a woman was just one of them," said Wahl, who was the sole woman on the court for five years.

Coyne was known for saying, "A wise old man and a wise old woman often reach the same conclusion" - a statement that has been quoted by U.S. Supreme

Court Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sandra Day O'Connor.

Coyne was instrumental in crafting family-law opinions, including that in *Nardini vs. Nardini*, which addressed the dissolution of traditional marriages.

"When they're in their mid-50s, at the height of success, men cannot understand not being able to get a job," Wahl said. "Men just didn't realize what a woman's diminished earning power really was."

Coyne was intense, dedicated, bright and fun, said Cynthia Johnson, a Supreme Court commissioner who worked with her on the Advisory Committee on the Rules of Civil Appellate Procedure. The committee devised the rules for the appellate procedure for the Court of Appeals, created in 1983.

"There are many of us who worked there who would say she was a friend, colleague and mentor," Johnson said. "She was dedicated to whatever she did."

Coyne is survived by a brother, Robert Coyne, of Sacramento, Calif. Funeral arrangements are pending.