

# Judge left mark on court system as trailblazer for women's rights

*Mary Pearl Williams, 1928-2012*

By **Steven Kreytak**

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Mary Pearl Williams, who in 1973 became Travis County's first female judge and went on to a 27-year career on the County Court-at-Law and state District Court benches, died Wednesday of complications from diabetes after a long illness. She was 84.

Williams, a Democrat, was the judge of the 53rd District Court, which hears civil cases, from 1981 until her retirement at the end of 2000. Before that, she was the judge of County Court-at-Law #2, which also heard civil cases, as well as misdemeanor criminal cases. Williams was appointed to that bench by the Commissioners Court in 1973 and didn't draw a challenger in seven elections that followed.

Longtime Austin lawyer Janet Stockard described Williams as an outstanding judge who was "so down-to-earth, so friendly, so helpful" at a time when there were few female lawyers in town.

"For her to get to be a judge, it's a huge accomplishment," she said. "The old boys gave her a heaping hard time."

Williams, an Austin resident, was quoted in a 1979 news story saying that her early years on the bench were difficult because of her sex. "No attorney likes to hear 'overruled,'" she said. "If the male attorney has any slight chauvinistic feeling, rulings are aggravating because they are from a woman."

Stephanie Laden, one of Williams' three children, recalls her mother embracing her unique role as a trailblazer for women, often speaking to community groups about the importance of women uniting for equal opportunity.

"She was very feisty," said Laden, who lives in Austin.

Williams' career was sprinkled with highlights. As a County Court-at-Law judge, she attacked a backlog of cases she inherited by setting a goal of disposing cases in 120 days and issuing subpoenas to police officers to get them into court. Police officials and lawyers complained, but Williams stood firm. The backlog disappeared.

She started a nationally recognized court administration program and called on her fluent Spanish to converse with non-English speaking defendants. At her suggestion, probation officers began translating some court documents into Spanish.

In 1998, during a last-minute hearing for a death row inmate, she condemned the state's closed-door clemency process — a milestone in the ongoing debate over how Texas reviews death penalty cases.

Williams was born Mary Pearl Hall in 1928 in Brownsville, where her father, Marvin Hall, was Cameron County attorney. She moved to Austin with her family as a child when her father became the fire insurance commissioner of Texas.

She graduated from Austin High School in 1944 and later earned bachelor's and law degrees from the University of Texas, where she met her future husband, former U.S. Appeals Court Judge Jerre S. Williams.

He was a law professor at the time, and the two began dating after Williams graduated. The couple married in 1950; Jerre Williams died of lung disease in 1993.

During the early years of their marriage, the couple lived in New York, where Williams occasionally modeled for the famed Harry Conover Agency, and in Washington, where she worked as a labor arbitrator and a civil rights officer.

In addition to Laden, Williams is survived by a son, the Rev. Jerre Stockton Williams Jr. of Kerrville; daughter Shelley Austin of Austin; six grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren. A memorial service is scheduled for 2 p.m. March 5 at University United Methodist Church.

skreytak@statesman.com; 912-2946

Additional material by staff writer Andrea Ball.