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OBITUARY

Judge helped families solve conflicts

BY BARBARA BROWN

During his 36 years on the bench in Hamilton, Justice John VanDuzer dedicated himself to helping families of every description sort out their troubles and conflicts.

At the end of the day, however, he would hang up his robes, close his law books and set judgments aside. For VanDuzer was just as committed to his own family and not the kind of husband and father to bring his work home.

VanDuzer, who retired in 2002, was a co-founder of the Unified Family Court of Hamilton-Wentworth that, in 1977, became a model for the practice of family law in Ontario. He died last week at age 78.

Peter VanDuzer, 45, said his father was very involved in their lives growing up because their mother, Betty VanDuzer, who died in 1984, had rheumatoid arthritis and wasn't able to keep up with three active children, including his brother, Tony, and sister, Sarah.

"When we were kids, whenever we needed something, like a ride to school or to band practice, he never, ever said, 'No,'" recalled Peter.

"He was always ready to give us a hand and (was) generous, almost to a fault."

Peter said it was his privilege to have been raised by a father who was the sort of man he would aspire to become.

John Elston VanDuzer was born in Winona and raised on a fruit farm. He studied history and economics at McMaster University before receiving his law degree from Osgoode Hall in 1954. The young lawyer was appointed a judge in Provincial Court in 1966.

Along with Justices David Steinberg and Patrick Gravely, VanDuzer received a federal appointment in 1976. They were the original judges in a three-year pilot project that brought together in one courthouse all cases involving matrimonial breakdown, custody and access, domestic violence and youthful offenders.

Hamilton's Unified Family Court changed the way family law was practised in Ontario.

Superior Court Justice George Crutrin said VanDuzer strongly believed in alternative dispute resolution. He felt parties in a marital dispute should have the chance to meet with a judge without having a decision imposed on them and without the necessity of a trial.

"He treated everybody with fairness and kindness. And he had time for everybody," said Crutrin.

"I think, generally speaking, people would say that when you went into his court – even if you didn't always succeed with the position you wanted – that you felt you were heard and that you were treated with respect."

Tony VanDuzer, a law professor at the University of Ottawa, said his father practised in their home what he preached in the courts.

"In our house, communication lines were always open. And as he did for everyone, he had a high level of respect for all the kids as individual people."

In 1985, VanDuzer married Joan Wansbrough, and became a stepfather to Michael, Connie and Gwyn.

VanDuzer was the first Canadian president of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts.

He was a director on boards of various charitable institutions throughout his life, but in his final years focused his efforts on the Canadian Institute of Child Health, based in Ottawa.

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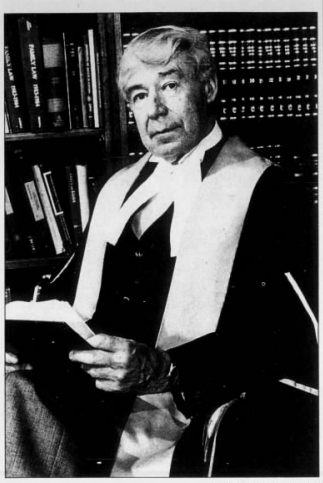

SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Justice John VanDuzer: a family court judge who favoured discussion over rulings.

Cash crunch shuts council

Money problems are forcing the board of the Oakville Arts Council to disband by the end of the year.

Board president Jody Sanderson said arts grants and town funding have fallen short.

"The 2006 revenue projections for earned revenue, sponsorship and donations were deemed unattainable by the board," Sanderson said of the Nov. 9 decision.

The not-for-profit organization is 27 years old and promotes arts and culture in the town. It will cease business Dec. 31, but keep its office open Tuesdays and Thursdays until then.

Among the council's recommendations was that any surplus funds go to the Community Foundation of Oakville for the arts.

Members can vote on the motion of dissolution at a meeting Tuesday, Dec. 13 at 7 p.m. in the auditorium of the Central Library at 120 Navy St., Oakville.

For details, call 905-815-5977 or visit artscouncil@oakville.ca.

United Way needs help

The Brant United Way is urging companies and individuals to help achieve the $1.47-million goal. It has raised $606,332 and wraps up Dec. 2.

"Now is the time for anyone considering making a donation to step forward and demonstrate their support towards helping," said campaign chair David Bailey.

The Hamilton Spectator

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