Jerry Solovy dies at age 80

By Jerry Crimmins
Law Bulletin staff writer

Jerold S. Solovy, who was chairman of Jenner & Block LLP for 17 years until 2007, and whose name became synonymous with citizen court reform efforts in Illinois, died today at his second home in Naples, Fla., according to lawyers at his firm.

“It’s devastating,” said his friend of 55 years at the firm, Thomas P. Sullivan, the former U.S. attorney here.

Solovy “was a role model for all of us and one of the leading lawyers not just in Chicago but throughout the country,” Sullivan said.

“Jerry Solovy was one of the most spectacular human beings and lawyers I’ve ever had the privilege of working with,” said Jeffrey D. Colman, also a partner at Jenner & Block.

“This is a profoundly sad day for Jerry’s family and our entire legal community,” Colman said.

“Jerry has been one of the moving forces behind improving the quality of our administration of justice in Chicago and the state and our country.”

Colman said he was informed at 11:30 a.m. today by Anton R. Valukas, the chairman of Jenner & Block, that Solovy had died in his home in Naples, Fla., where he was with his wife, Kathleen.

Illinois Supreme Court Chief Justice Thomas L. Kilbride said Wednesday, “We’ve lost one of the finest lawyers in the history of Illinois. If you say that, where do you stop the accolades?”

Solovy, 80, appeared hale and hearty a few weeks ago when a reporter visited him in his office. He said last year he still worked seven days a week and charged $1,000 an hour, billed 2,000 hours a year and did another 1,000 hours of legal work each year pro bono.

He marked his 55th anniversary with Jenner & Block on Sept. 12.

“I didn’t know there was any problem,” Sullivan said, referring to Solovy’s health.

Valukas said Wednesday that Solovy “was a fierce litigator with the heart of a public servant who took great pride in the

fact that much of his work was based on referrals from former opposing counsel. His commitment to pro bono and public service was legendary.”

Solovy once said good deeds led to his

success as a lawyer.

“I think it’s a good lesson for young people that when you do well for others, you do well for yourself,” he liked to say.

“When you do good things, good things happen to you.”

As a trial lawyer, Solovy won numerous big verdicts. When he was 75 years old, Solovy and his team won his biggest monetary verdict ever in a jury trial against the investment banking firm Morgan Stanley & Co., $1.45 billion.

But when asked why he and his firm did so much pro bono work, Solovy said in 2005, “You are not put on earth just to make money. You are put on earth to do good for your fellow persons.”

He said this was Jewish tradition.

He counted as “the biggest milestone” in his life, his major role in Jenner & Block’s victory in a death penalty case, Witherspoon v. State of Illinois.

That 1968 decision by the U.S. Supreme Court resulted in an estimated 350 inmates being taken off death row around the nation.

Two of the biggest commissions Chicago and the state have ever seen for court reform were nicknamed by the news media Solovy Commission I and Solovy II, reflecting his leadership role.

For the first one, then-Chief Judge Harry G. Comerford named Solovy to head a blue-ribbon commission in 1984, to figure out what to do after the revelations of the federal government’s Operation Greylord investigation into bribery and corruption in Cook County courts.

Greylord was the biggest scandal to ever hit the courts here.

Some prominent men thought the first Solovy Commission would “whitewash” judicial corruption, Solovy later said, and that he himself would be “a patsy, you know, for the chief judge.”

Instead, the two Solovy commissions proposed far-reaching changes in the misdemeanor and preliminary hearing courts, Traffic Court, Criminal Court, Juvenile Court, the civil courts, the probation department, the clerk’s office, the state’s attorney’s office and the public defender’s office. Not all the proposals were adopted, but many were, and those changes are still felt today.

The second Solovy commission came in 1992 when a new federal investigation showed that corruption in the Cook County courts went beyond the misdemeanor and preliminary hearing courts into the felony trial courts.

The Illinois Supreme Court that year named Solovy chairman of a statewide commission on the administration of justice.

“We were not popular” in the early years of those commissions, Solovy once said.

But Donald P. O’Connell, who worked closely with Solovy in those years and who became chief judge of Cook County Circuit Court, said:

“Almost single-handedly Jerry led the effort that brought respect back to the Circuit Court of Cook County.”

O’Connell said Wednesday, “He was a giant of the legal community and a giant of a friend.”

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When O’Connell was presiding judge of the 1st Municipal District and met great resistance from lawyers and judges to his reform efforts, O’Connell said, “Solovy was very, very supportive and continued to tell me I should do the right thing and I should continue without the slightest hesitation.”

Solovy also lost cases that he had put his heart into, such as the Baby Richard case where he represented adoptive parents who were forced to give their child back to the natural parents.

Solovy was born here in 1930 to immigrant parents from White Russia, David and Ida Solovy.

“My father had a luggage store at 63rd and Rochester,” Solovy had said. His father also, together with Solovy’s uncles, ran five dance halls in Chicago. Young Solovy grew up in the early years of the Depression at 6218 S. Ingleside Ave., south of the University of Chicago.

As a child, he had said he was deeply shy and talked to almost no one but his mother. “If I saw other kids while walking down the street, I hid behind my mother.”

His first desire was to be a policeman, and later a soldier but his mother said no to both.

“At nine, I said I wanted to be a lawyer. She said, ‘Fine.’”

He graduated from South Shore High School. At the University of Michigan, he had said he “blossomed forth and talked to people. I became a very un-Jewish thing, a ham,” he said.

He got his law degree from Harvard University Law School in 1955.

He is survived by his second wife, Kathleen Hart Solovy; three sons, Stephen Solovy, Jonathan Solovy, and Scott Reading; his daughter, Kelly Peters; and eight grandchildren.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

Solovy once said, “Realistically, any good thing I ever did … has only repaid me handsomely. Just look at all the nice people I have met and the people that have helped me along the way.”

Reporter John Flynn Rooney contributed to this story.