

Gerald (“Jerry”) W. Laabs

(August 1, 1944 – September 7, 2015)

Gerald (“Jerry”) W. Laabs was born on August 1, 1944 to Harold and Martha Laabs in Marshfield, WI and was raised in Curtiss, WI. Jerry was proud of his family’s business as cheese makers in the Curtiss area. He often mentioned the Laabs Cheese Factory and he and Nancy spent hours upon hours researching the Laabs family genealogy. Unfortunately, Jerry’s dad passed at a young age and his brother at an even earlier age.

Jerry graduated high school in Tomah, WI, and attended the University of Wisconsin La Crosse for his undergraduate studies. Jerry graduated from the University of Wisconsin Law School in 1969. He spoke highly of many of his colleagues that he graduated with and maintained those relationships during his distinguished career as an attorney and judge.

He married Nancy German in 1972. Jerry and Nancy raised two boys, Marc and Jay. It is said of most parents that their children are their pride and joy – that is an understatement for Jerry and Nancy. Jerry thoroughly enjoyed raising his two boys, spending many weekends traveling with them in his conversion van for basketball tournaments prior to them reaching high school. Not only would Jerry take his boys, but also their friends and classmates, some of which that would not otherwise be able to travel to such events but for Jerry’s willingness and generosity. Jerry coached with his good friend, Dennis Eberhardt, for many years, however, leaving the head coaching position to ‘Gabby’ knowing that the head coach would be the subject of parental criticism, leaving Jerry to smooth things over with the discontented parents. Jerry was truly Marc’s and Jay’s biggest fan as they progressed through high school and rarely, perhaps never, missed one of their sporting events through high school.

Jerry had many passions outside of the practice of law. He was an avid golfer for many years, becoming the club champion in Tomah at one time. He loved his gardens and especially the tomatoes that he grew and consumed (blaming the tomatoes for the gout he would endure). He was an excellent cook and enjoyed cooking up special meals when Marc and Jay would return home. Jerry was also a history buff, focusing on the Civil War and the various battles that were fought during that time period.

Jerry was also an avid Wisconsin Badger sports fan. He made many trips to Madison with his good friends from Black River to watch his Badgers and has many stories about those adventures (many of which are still told at Cozy Corner in Black River Falls). As his boys grew to appreciate Camp Randall, it was common for Jerry, Marc and Jay to travel to Madison on crisp fall afternoons to watch the Badgers, even during the Don Morton years.

Jerry primarily practiced law out of his office in Black River Falls. However, his original practice included an office in Tomah, WI. Jerry had many business partners during his years as a practicing attorney, many that continue to practice today, including Rob Mubarek, Jay Carmichael, Tom Casey, Paul Millis, Marc Skolos and Gerald Fox. Jerry also practiced with Gene Radcliffe, and for many years with his mentor and good friend, the late Judge Robert Radcliffe.

Jerry forged strong relationships with many of his fellow Tri-County Bar members. The Koslo, Kostner and Brovold firm was especially helpful to Jerry during his years as a solo practitioner. He also knew he could commiserate with Mike Chambers, or at least share a cold beer with him this may not have solved the problem but at least it was forgotten for another day. Jerry truly valued the camaraderie of the Tri-County Bar, attending the summer and winter meetings on a

regular basis. He was part of or witnessed many historic events of the Tri-County Bar and took pride in sharing those stories with younger members of our unique association.

Jerry also developed great friendships with his assistants. He had very little turnover in his office and valued his trusted staff, Lorraine, Debbie and Jan. Jerry especially enjoyed hosting the office Christmas parties where Lorraine and her husband Ken would lead the group in singing Christmas songs to the accompaniment of the piano.

Jerry was committed and genuinely cared about his clients. His client's problems became Jerry's problems. Jerry committed his full attention to obtaining the best possible outcome for his clients. To that end, Jerry was very fair. He never oversold a case to his clients and never sold a client short. He became respected among his clients and peers for his fairness which led to many amicable settlements, not only saving his clients' money on legal costs, but also saving them from the stress of a long drawn out legal battle.

Jerry was part of the success of many of his clients. A source of pride for Jerry was his counsel to the Co-op Credit Union. Jerry helped the Credit Union through a very difficult transition many years ago. Since that time, the Credit Union has thrived and grown, to which they give Jerry a great deal of credit. Even in retirement, Jerry would ask about the Credit Union and the many friends that worked or retired from there.

Jerry's kindness extended beyond his clients. One example of this is during the Gulf War, Jerry was at the courthouse late one Friday afternoon for presiding over a hearing as Family Court Commissioner. A young soldier and his girlfriend were there looking for the Judge as they wanted to get married before the young soldier was deployed. With the absence of the Judge, Jerry instructed the young soldier to meet him at his office. Jerry's longtime assistant, Debbie,

stayed late after work to witness the ceremony. Needing a second witness, Jerry looked outside his office door and caught his good friend Terry Thompson as Terry was entering the establishment next door. Jerry presided over the ceremony with one interruption, Terry speaking up in the middle to say, "Holy shit, you were serious!". The young soldier went on to serve our country with the comfort of having been married through the kindness of Jerry.

Jerry truly enjoyed the practice of law and he considered his clients friends and his clients considered Jerry a friend. In fact, when Jerry ran for Judge, many of his clients indicated they would not vote for Jerry because they did not want to lose him as their attorney! Jerry struggled with this and the campaign for Judge was a very difficult time for Jerry.

Jerry became Jackson County Circuit Court Judge in August, 2002. As when he was an attorney, Judge Laabs became known as a very fair and caring Judge. Judge Laabs worked hard to develop and implement the County's first drug court program. He was very proud of this accomplishment and under his oversight, the drug court was a success. He also felt that it was important to build a solid relationship with the Ho-Chunk Nation and he was able to gain the respect and admiration of many of the leaders of the Nation by the time he retired from office. Judge Laabs genuinely cared about people and, knowing his decisions affected the lives of those before him, was thoughtful and deliberate in every decision he made.

Jerry retired from the bench in 2008 and thoroughly enjoyed his retirement with Nancy. Jerry would be seen walking on a daily basis in Black River Falls. Jerry and Nancy loved spending time with the grandkids and Jerry spoke of his grandchildren with the same pride and joy that he spoke of his own boys. Jerry and Nancy spent the Winter months in Arizona, highlighted by visits from Marc, Jay, their wives and the grandchildren. Jerry enjoyed his walks in Arizona, played a little tennis with Nancy and hit the golf ball on occasion.

The Honorable Gerald W. Laabs, age 71, passed away on September 7, 2015, with his family at his bedside. In a fitting tribute to the Honorable Judge Gerald W. Laabs, family, friends, many Judges and Tri-County Bar members filled the Skyline Golf Course in Black River Falls to share stories and cocktails in cheerful remembrance of our friend, and fellow Tri-County Bar member.

Respectfully submitted this 8th day of January, 2016.

Paul B. Millis

Bruce J. Brovold