



Richard J. Phelan

March 2, 1937 - March 27, 2024

Richard J. Phelan, March 29, 1937, to March 27, 2024: A Life Well Lived

A survivor of six bouts of cancer over the past 25 years, Dick (as he was known) died peacefully two days before he was to turn 87. His wife of 34 years, Barbara, was at his side in their home in Chicago's north suburban Lake Forest. The cause of death was metastatic cancer.

Dick was born in Chicago on March 29, 1937, the oldest of five children and the only son of Jane and Jack Phelan, a lawyer and Chicago precinct captain. Dick grew up on Chicago's North Side and was a proud graduate of Our Lady of Lourdes grade school and Quigley Seminary Preparatory School. He earned a Bachelor of Science in Accounting and Philosophy from the University of Notre Dame and his Juris Doctorate from Georgetown University Law Center.

The grandson of an Irish immigrant. At one time contemplated becoming a priest. In 1992 as Cook County Board President, Dick used his executive powers to reinstate abortions at Cook County Hospital after they were banned by his predecessor George Dunne. Dick overcame a lobbying campaign by several Cook County Board commissioners who challenged his decision unsuccessfully in court. His chief of staff, Bill Filan, was always by his side.

Dick began his career as a trial lawyer at leading Chicago law firms before starting his own firm in 1976 focusing on corporate law. Phelan, Pope & John quickly became one of the leading litigation firms in Chicago, with some of the city's most prominent trial lawyers of the era, including Dick's brother-in-law and former Illinois Appellate Court Justice William R. Quinlan.

In 1985 Dick took on the ultimately successful defense of Jewel Food Stores against a massive class action lawsuit alleging willful neglect for selling salmonella-tainted milk. Phelan and Jewel won a jury verdict in favor of the grocery giant.

After an accomplished career as a leading trial lawyer, his assignment as special outside counsel to lead the U.S. House Ethics Committee probe of U.S. House Speaker Jim Wright was high stakes. Wright stood accused of ethics violations including accepting improper gifts from a Texas developer and skirting House rules by collecting book royalties from special interests buying in bulk a collection of his speeches.

In its coverage of the May 1989 case, The New York Times wrote of Dick:

“Indeed, colleagues and committee members say Mr. Phelan is relentless, tenacious, charming and ambitious: a man equally adept at seducing a jury and sacking a hostile witness, a man both realistic and righteous, who thought of being a priest and still thinks of winning a judgeship or some other Government office.”

Wright denied the charges, but he resigned.

The Wright prosecution elevated Dick's national profile, but the case coincided with a personal tragedy when his late wife, Carol, an architect, died of a heart attack while they vacationed over the 1989 Christmas holiday in Hawaii with their three grown children, Mark, Anne and Jane. The couple had met on a

blind date.

He had been encouraged to run for Cook County Board president. Dick's successful 1990 campaign was run by Eric Adelstein, today a prominent national political consultant. Campaign staff included two future mayors, Rahm Emanuel and Lori Lightfoot, as well as political consultant Pete Giangreco. After mounting an unsuccessful run for Governor in 1994, Dick returned to practicing law, serving as managing partner of Chicago law firm Foley & Lardner. He led the firm's 2000 merger with Chicago law firm Hopkins & Sutter.

He served as president of the Chicago Bar Association, the Dean of the International Academy of Trial Lawyers, and a law professor at Chicago-Kent College of Law. A tireless public servant, Dick was a board member of numerous organizations during his career and well into his retirement.

Dick married Barbara in 1991 after they met on the second blind date of his life, arranged by his sister Maureen Mohling. Their life together began in the political world. They met and became friends with statesman scholars and the working class during his term as county board president. They spent many happy and active years together splitting their time between Lake Forest and Naples, Fla., where they were involved in numerous charities. In retirement Dick started a lecture series, remained an avid reader. He also enjoyed golfing, swimming, running and taking bike trips. He was a religious man who never stopped learning.

"Dick was the love of my life and a wonderful partner to me and a devoted father to his three children and a proud grandfather of six," Barbara said. "Politics could use someone of Dick's convictions today. He advocated for equality for women as a lawyer and as an elected official."

Dick was committed to his family and friends, and he will be remembered for his optimistic and positive attitude, great intellect, leadership, and compassion.

“He was simply amazing. A life well lived,” said Barbara.

In addition to Barbara, Dick is survived by his children Jane Phelan (David Jones), Anne Phelan Boyle (Charles Boyle), Mark Phelan (Jennifer Phelan); grandchildren Savanna Phelan Jones, Emma Boyle, Grace Boyle, Leo Boyle, Luke Phelan, Mary Carol Phelan; his sisters Maureen Phelan Mohling, Barbara Phelan, Jane Phelan Quinlan, and Kathleen Phelan Klein; numerous nieces and nephews; and many friends and colleagues. He will be missed.

A Funeral Mass will be held at 4:00 p.m. on Friday, April 12, 2024, at Old St. Patrick’s Church, 700 W. Adams Street, Chicago, IL 60661. The Mass will be livestreamed at <https://livestream.com/oldstpats>. There will be no visitation.

Parking is available in the building located at 625 West Adams Street, Chicago, Illinois 60661 (entrance is on Desplaines Street - 1/2 block South of the Church on the East side of the Desplaines Street). For additional parking information - <https://www.oldstpats.org/parking.html> .

A private interment will be held at Lake Forest Cemetery in Lake Forest, Illinois.

In lieu of flowers, please consider making a memorial contribution in his memory to Northwestern Memorial Hospital <https://nmgive.donordrive.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=donate.event&eventID=619>, the Mayo Clinic <https://philanthropy.mayoclinic.org/donateMC>, or a charity of your choice.

For more information, contact Reuland & Turnbough Funeral Directors of Lake

Forest, 847-234-9649 or visit www.RTfunerals.com.

Cemetery Details

Lake Forest Cemetery

1525 North Lake Road
Lake Forest, IL 60045

Previous Events

Funeral Mass

APR **12**. 4:00 PM (CT)

Old St. Patrick's Church
700 West Adams Street
Chicago, IL 60661
<https://www.oldstpats.org/>

Tribute Wall



“ *Reuland & Turnbough Funeral Home created a Mass Livestream in memory of Richard J. Phelan*



Reuland & Turnbough Funeral Directors of Lake Forest - April 02, 2024 at 05:54 PM

MC

“ *Barbara, I'm sorry for your loss. Praying your memories bring you comfort.*

Mary Curran - April 03, 2024 at 08:40 PM