

# Nelson, Franklin County district attorney, dies unexpectedly

By JENNIFER FITCH

October 8, 2009

[waynesboro@herald-mail.com](mailto:waynesboro@herald-mail.com)

CHAMBERSBURG, Pa. — Franklin County District Attorney John F. “Jack” Nelson died unexpectedly Thursday morning at Chambersburg Hospital, leaving his friends and colleagues with grief and disbelief.

“This is an immense loss to the county and the court system,” President Judge Douglas W. Herman said.

“It’s just a sad day in Franklin County,” Warden John Wetzel said.

Colleagues said Nelson, 58, the longest-serving elected official in the county, was instrumental in developing the Day Reporting Center, Central Booking, new jail, weekender program and Drug Task Force.

“This criminal justice system in Franklin County is recognized nationally, and Jack was a big part of that,” Wetzel said.

Nelson graduated from Dickinson School of Law and worked as an assistant district attorney in Franklin County in the 1970s and early 1980s. He was appointed district attorney in 1986 and elected six times after that.

“He put his heart and soul into the district attorney’s office,” said Terry Ward, a retired probation officer.

Herman described Nelson as a knowledgeable prosecutor who had passion for each of his cases.

“He worked his cases hard, and he believed in them,” Herman said. “When he stood in front of the jury, that came out because his heart was in it.”

“He could be as passionate about a routine drug case as an armed robbery or a

murder. ... The courtroom was a second home to him,” Assistant District Attorney Angela Krom said.

Not only did Nelson serve as a role model for the assistant district attorneys, but also for defense lawyers and judges, Herman said.

“You had something to learn from Jack Nelson every day,” he said.

“He was more than a boss,” Krom said. “Everyone in this office would say he was a friend.”

“Jack Nelson was a close personal friend ... and a dedicated public servant. He’ll be missed by many,” said Bob Thomas, chairman of the Franklin County Commissioners.

Friends described Nelson as a mustached, cowboy boot-wearing fan of University of Pittsburgh football and an occasional fisherman. He also tirelessly pored over case materials to be fully prepared for court, earning him respect from other prosecutors across the state, they said.

“Jack was a very caring individual and understood the human side of his work,” Herman said.

“Jack was a mentor to a generation of attorneys who served with him, but he was also a good friend to me and many others. We will greatly miss his friendship, but cherish our memories of him,” state Sen. Richard Alloway, R-Franklin/Adams /York, said in a news release.

Ward said he recently saw Nelson at a grocery store and learned that the district attorney was thinking a lot about Ronald W. Harshman’s case. Nelson won a murder conviction against Harshman in 2001, but some witnesses are now recanting statements.

Nelson also prosecuted the case of death-row inmate Albert E. Reid, who was convicted of killing his estranged wife and stepdaughter. Krom worked with Nelson on that case and said his efforts during it further demonstrated his belief — “do the right thing for the right reason.”

Nelson instilled that belief and a passion for the law in several generations of attorneys fortunate enough to work in his office, which expanded staffing levels

greatly in the past 30 years, Krom said.

“He was probably one of the smartest guys around. What a huge loss to his family and friends, and to our system,” Wetzal said, saying Nelson always gave out good, honest advice.

Pennsylvania’s County Code says the Court of Common Pleas judges should appoint someone to fill the vacancy until “the first Monday in January following the next municipal election occurring not less than ninety days after the occurrence of the vacancy.” The county’s assistant solicitor is researching this matter in coordination with the courts, the commissioners said in a news release.

The next municipal election is Nov. 3 and another one will be in 2011.

“Jack Nelson was a public servant and gentleman of the highest caliber. His death represents a tremendous loss to the people of Franklin County, and I will miss him very much,” Commissioner David S. Keller said.

“Jack Nelson was held in high esteem in the halls of justice throughout the Commonwealth. His loss will be felt far and wide,” Commissioner Robert G. Ziobrowski said.

[John F. Nelson, who served as Franklin County \(Pa.\) district attorney since 1986, died unexpectedly Thursday morning.](#)

File photo |

John F. Nelson, who served as Franklin County (Pa.) district attorney since 1986, died unexpectedly Thursday morning.

[Purchase this photo](#)

[View comments or add your own »](#)

## Top Homes

-  \$164,900 [view home »](#)
-  \$254,900 [view home »](#)

- [Electronics](#)
- [Flowers & Plants](#)
- [Games & Hobbies](#)
- [Hardware Stores](#)
- [Music](#)