

Thomas Robert Cornish, retired United States Bankruptcy Judge for the Eastern District of Oklahoma, passed away on February 2, 2022. Tom served the Tenth Circuit with distinction from 1994 until his retirement on September 1, 2021. He leaves behind family who love him, friends who treasure him, lawyers who respect and admire him, and a career that made a big, big difference.

Tom was born on August 22, 1944, in Ft. Worth, TX, the third son of Rita Pool Cornish and William A. Cornish, who was then serving in the U.S. Army Air Corps. He attended St. John Elementary School, McAlester; St. Gregory's High School, Shawnee; and completed his undergraduate work at Oklahoma State University, obtaining a B. S. in Business in 1966. Tom was awarded his Juris Doctorate from the University of Oklahoma in 1968.

After completing law school, he served as an attorney for the Department of Institutions, Social and Rehabilitative Services. Tom Cornish was a municipal prosecutor for the City of McAlester and was vice-chairman of the Juvenile Delinquency Committee of the Crime Commission. He was also a member of the Oklahoma Bar Association's Committee on Media in the Courtroom.

Ever the overachiever, Tom was appointed to the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals in October 1977 at the age of 33, making him the youngest appointee in that Court's history. Tom was retained in 1978 for a full six-year term and served as presiding judge. During his court tenure, he was a special justice on the Oklahoma Supreme Court and was a judge of the Appellate Division of the Court on the Judiciary. Ever the student, Tom obtained a Master of Laws from the University of Virginia in 1982. He continued to serve the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals with distinction until 1984, when he returned to private practice in Oklahoma City. The exemplary service he gave to the Court of Criminal Appeals was only the beginning.

On February 7, 1994, Tom was appointed to the United States Bankruptcy Court for the Eastern District of Oklahoma. When the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals formed a Bankruptcy Appellate Panel in 1996, they selected Tom as a founding member. He served on that Panel until his retirement. This court reviews most of all appeals from eight bankruptcy courts in the six states that comprise the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals. Tom served the BAP in various capacities, including Chief Judge, until retirement. Tom also sat on various BAP, state, and federal committees, and was a speaker at educational programs around the country. He presided over his share of big and small cases, never forgetting that those "small" cases were anything but to the people who stood before him, faced with the prospect of losing a home, a car, or even a way of life. Tom's kindness and judicial temperament were the stuff of legend.

Tom was also a mediator in each of Oklahoma's three federal judicial districts. He was well known for volunteering to handle cases in many bankruptcy courts with overcrowded dockets throughout the United States. Tom served on the Board of Governors of the National Conference of Bankruptcy Judges, and on its committee on International Relations, Elections, and Site Selection. He attended the Sir Richard May Seminar on International Law and International Courts in The Hague, Netherlands. Tom was nominated and selected to attend this Seminar on the basis of his extensive experience in international relations, as well as the diversity of his experience as a judge and private attorney.

Tom Cornish was a leader in a variety of committees and organizations, including the Oklahoma Court on the Judiciary, Chairman of the Governor's Commission on Reform of State Government in Oklahoma, Chairman of the Oklahoma Development Finance Authority, the Juvenile Delinquency Committee of the Oklahoma Crime Commission, the Board of Governors of the Oklahoma Bar Association, and the Board of Directors and Board of Trustees of St. Gregory's University, Shawnee, Oklahoma.

Tom traveled extensively, visiting all seven continents of the world. He participated in numerous events as a host to foreign judges and traveled with a delegation of judges and lawyers to the Soviet Union to observe its legal system. His court also assisted the U.S. District Court when it hosted a delegation of Russian judges who were observing U.S. court operations. During many of his personal international trips, he visited various courthouses and observed foreign legal proceedings.

Much of Tom's successful court experience was due to his Court Team/Family. He also enjoyed many fun domestic and foreign trips that included Gayle since their marriage, which brought both great joy and love.

For all his accomplishments, Tom's true legacy is found in the lives of those privileged to know him. It is a well-worn (perhaps even worn-out) cliché, but when it comes to Tom Cornish, it is truth: Tom never met a stranger. He was always welcoming, open, and ready to extend a hand. Were you to assemble 100 people who knew Tom Cornish in a single room and ask them "How many of you considered Tom Cornish to be a close friend?" at least 99 hands would rise (sorry, Tom, no one is perfect). If you were Tom's friend, he went out of his way to make a difference in your life. Moreover, he did the same thing for people he never met. We have suffered a great loss and will not see the likes of him again.

Many would never have guessed Tom could be happy for so long as a resident of Okmulgee, but that is where he formed such solid friendships with neighbors, firefighters, housekeepers, veterinarians, and fellow dog lovers. For all his years in Okmulgee, Tom usually had no less than four rescued dogs roaming the house and large backyard of Tom's Dog Heaven. There are now three lovable dogs waiting for new homes.

Tom was a sustaining member of his Uganda Martyrs Catholic Church. It was that diverse parish which motivated and symbolized Tom's helping hand to so many in need. His story cannot end without telling of Tom the fisherman, near and far, white-water rafting and, yes, he rode many miles on his beautiful turquoise Harley Davidson. Someone said Tom did all the fun and meaningful things before he retired.

Tom is survived by his wife, Gayle Freeman Cornish; his daughter Tricia Cornish Meeks and husband Darren; son, Abe Cornish, and wife Connie; brother Fred Cornish and wife Lee, sister Cloyd Cornish; nephews, William and Richard Cornish and Richard's wife Ginger; nieces, Christina, Claire and her husband Joel, and Elizabeth, as well as grandson Nolan Meeks and his wife Collette, and their children Garret and Lilyette, and over one hundred members of his mother's Pool Family and Cornish cousins. His parents, William, and Rita Pool Cornish; brothers, William M. and Richard P. ("Whitey") Cornish; and his son Abe's biological mother, Katherine Bartlett Cornish, to whom Tom was married for eight years, all predeceased him.

There will be a private family cemetery service honoring Tom in McAlester, Oklahoma. A celebration of his life will take place later and will be announced. Memorials in Tom's name may be made to St. Gregory's Abbey, Shawnee, Oklahoma, Uganda Martyrs Catholic Church, Okmulgee, Oklahoma, Free to Live in Oklahoma City, or a charity of choice.