

Judge William J. Nealon: At the Heart of it All



In the legal system, it is said that the best settlement is always better than the best verdict. This belief recognizes the courtroom, above all else, as a safe haven for members of civil society to come together and have their conflicts resolved. The judicial system works best not when one party emerges from the courtroom victorious, but rather when both parties can walk away having found that elusive patch of common ground, truly believing that justice was done.

Such mutually equitable solutions require a truly gifted mediator, imbued with a combination of intelligence, patience, fairness, and a natural desire to see people come together.

United States District Justice William J. Nealon of Scranton personifies these qualities, evidenced by the fact that he is one of the longest tenured federal judges in the country. His life is celebrated in the WVIA biographical film ***Judge William J. Nealon: At the Heart of it All***

William "Red" Nealon grew up in the Nativity section of Scranton in the 1920s and 30s. It was the very picture of the Irish immigrant experience in northeastern Pennsylvania. His neighborhood, predominantly Irish and almost exclusively blue collar, was built literally and spiritually around Nativity of Our Lord Church. Young Red's father was a truck driver and Teamsters Union organizer, who was just as likely to "settle things in the street" as he was at the negotiating table. He instilled in his son the importance of equity and fairness, a day's work for a day's pay.

When his older brother Bob went to the University of Miami, he convinced Red to come along. When World War II broke out, both brothers enlisted in the marines. Bob Nealon would never come home.

The death of his brother occasioned Bill's return home to Scranton, and a chance encounter with Jean Sullivan. She would later become his wife, a marriage which has lasted over sixty years.

William Nealon employed the discipline gained from his military service, and the opportunity of the G.I. Bill, to earn his college degree at Villanova University and receive his law degree from Catholic University. Education, he knew, was the key to achieving one's full potential. It would be a lesson he stressed to the ten children he and Jean would raise in their modest house on Hemlock Street. Through professional achievements and personal tragedies, faith, family and fellowship were Nealon hallmarks.



As a young lawyer, William Nealon would rise in political prominence during the 1950s and 60s. He would become the first president of the Lackawanna County Young Democrats, and chairman of the Democratic Committee. But his appeal to all political stripes would lead to an appointment on the Court of Common Pleas in 1960. Even at the young age of 36 his legal acumen, reputation for fairness and his uncanny ability to bring parties together made him ideally suited as a jurist.

His tenure on the Lackawanna County bench would be short, however. In 1962, president John F. Kennedy would appoint William J. Nealon to the United States District Court for the Middle

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District of Pennsylvania. He would serve as the court's Chief Justice for over twelve years, and he remains a senior judge on the federal district court today, over 45 years later.

During that time, Judge William Nealon has had a nationwide influence on the lives and careers of lawyers and litigants alike. An ever-growing fraternity of former law clerks still get together every year to celebrate what many of them consider to be the most rewarding job of their careers.



His decisions have helped to shape First Amendment rights, combat racism, and curb the abuses of corporate power in America and the world. In every case, Nealon's attention to detail and his ability to cut through the noise of adversarial rhetoric and truly recognize opposing points of view have made him a standard against which all other judges are measured.

His reputation for giving back to his community is unparalleled, serving on the boards of Mercy Hospital, the University of Scranton, the Catholic Youth Center and a host of other organizations concerned with the social, educational and welfare needs of the community. William Nealon lives the philosophy that happiness is best attained when giving it to someone else. To help others is not only our pleasure, but our obligation.

One rainy afternoon in 1964, William Nealon also helped shape the life of a grieving Robert F. Kennedy. A kindred spirit mourning the loss of his own brother just months before, Kennedy arrived in Scranton at Nealon's request to speak at the annual dinner of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick. It is documented that the outpouring of affection which met the Attorney General that day inspired him to take up his brother's call to action, embark on his own political career and write a poignant chapter in American history.



Yet for all of his professional accomplishments, William Nealon remains a family man from the Nativity section. He still checks all the grandchildren's report cards when they come due, just as he did for his own children. The whole family, sometimes numbering thirty or more, still gets together at the Nealon house for dinner every Sunday. The kids have offered to share the burden and host Sunday dinner at their own houses. But Bill and Jeanie Nealon wouldn't have it any other way.

Judge William J. Nealon: At the Heart of it All, is the fifth in the series *Great Pennsylvanians*, produced by WVIA to recognize individuals from northeastern Pennsylvania whose achievements bring honor to all Americans and who are models for young people. Previous documentaries portrayed the lives of former Governor William Warren Scranton, United States Federal Judge Max Rosenn, Monsignor Andrew McGowan, and Pennsylvania Ballet founder Barbara Weisberger.

The documentary will be simulcast from the Scranton Cultural Center on Monday night, November 17, 2008.