

Jim Himelic, judge, 'gentleman,' dies

By Hanna Miller

The Arizona Daily Star

Sunday, February 13, 2000

Jim Himelic, former Pima County prosecutor and Juvenile Court judge whose dedication kept him working even as a devastating disease ravaged his body, died yesterday.

He was 52.

Colleagues remembered Himelic as a fair and patient man who never lost his temper. Presiding Juvenile Court Judge John Davis said that while other prosecutors would try to wow jurors with flash, Himelic would win them over with kindness.

"If the jury spent a short time with him, they knew they could trust him," Davis said. "He was a wonderful person."

Himelic in 1996 was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a degenerative nerve disease commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease, after the dogged ballplayer it felled in 1939.

Himelic, however, refused to surrender to self-pity.

After learning of his diagnosis, he finished his workday and coached one of his children's baseball teams before going home to tell his wife, Diana, what the doctor had said.

"He never complained," Davis said. "He never asked for anything special. He didn't want to put anyone out or be a burden."

Himelic took early retirement last month, after spending three years as one of Pima County's nine Juvenile Court judges.

Davis said Himelic's patience and compassion made him an excellent Juvenile Court judge and "a great dad." Himelic had six children.

Davis said that when Himelic submitted his resume for the Juvenile Court position, the selection committee noticed he had listed relatively few community service commitments because he devoted his spare time to his family.

"His community service was raising six kids," Davis said.

Himelic didn't come from a large family. He was born March 19, 1947, in Salina, Kansas. Himelic and his brother, George, were raised in Bellevue, Nebraska.

After graduating from high school, Himelic enrolled in the University of Nebraska in Omaha and joined the wrestling team. He received his law degree from the University of Arizona in 1973.

Himelic then joined the Pima County Attorney's Office. He successfully prosecuted 128 felony cases, sending four killers to death row.

Defense attorney Tony Abruzzo told the Star last month he hated to meet Himelic in court, largely because Himelic could beat Abruzzo at his own game. Abruzzo said he always tries to be nicer than the prosecutor.

"But you can't do that with Himelic. He's a gentleman and that technique did not work with him," Abruzzo said.

Himelic met his wife, Diana, while working in the County Attorney's Office. Diana, a secretary, told the Star she first saw her future husband in an elevator. She was smitten by his smile; the two married in 1975.

Himelic left the County Attorney's Office to start his own practice in 1982. He handled criminal defense work until he was appointed a court commissioner in 1995. He was transferred to Juvenile Court in 1997.

Diana Himelic said she has been overwhelmed by the support friends and colleagues have offered her family.

In addition to his wife, Himelic is survived by his parents, George and Thelma Himelic, of Bellevue, Nebraska; a brother, George, of Omaha; daughters Ana, Jennifer and Jamie and sons Daniel, Michael and James.

Viewing is scheduled for Wednesday from 5 until 8 p.m. at St. Odilia Catholic Church, 7570 N. Paseo del Norte. There will be a prayer service at 7 p.m. Services will be held at Community Church of The Foothills, 480 E. Ina Road, on Thursday at 10 a.m.

The family asks that donations be made to the Muscular Dystrophy Association. Donations should be designated for ALS research and sent to 3300 E. Sunrise Drive, Tucson, AZ 85718.