

Thomas Johnson 1942—2016

Thomas S. Johnson, 73 of Rockford, senior partner of one of Rockford's oldest and largest law firms, died unexpectedly at home on Monday, February 15, 2016. Born May 21, 1942, in Rockford, son of Fred C. Johnson and Pauline Ross Johnson.

He graduated from East High School in 1960 - where he excelled in debate and received the Oratorical Contest award. He graduated from Rockford College in 1964 and then received his law degree from Harvard Law School in 1967.

He served in the U.S. [Army](#) from 1968-70, where he received the Meritorious Service Medal. Tom then returned to Rockford to join the law firm founded by his mentors, Karl Williams and John C. McCarthy, and began a distinguished legal career that lasted 46 years.

He concentrated his practice in trust and estate law and received the highest recognition in his specialty by being named as a Fellow of the American College of Trust and Estate Counsel. He was instrumental in the growth and success of WilliamsMcCarthy LLP and was President of the law firm from 1987 to 2002.

Tom possessed a brilliant mind, a sharp wit, and was unwavering in his support of the firm, his colleagues, his community and the legal profession. In the tradition of Daniel Burnham, his motto was "Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood."

Locally, he served in many leadership positions, including President of the Winnebago County Bar Association, Rockford Rotary, and as Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Rockford College. He gave his time, talent and treasure to countless Rockford organizations, including New American Theater, the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois and to the restoration of the historic Coronado Performing Arts Center.

For over forty-five years, Mr. Johnson provided leadership to a wide range of professional organizations, serving as a member of the Board of Governors of the Illinois State Bar Association and a member of the House of Delegates of the American Bar Association. He served as Chairman of four national commissions of the American Bar Association and testified on behalf of the American Bar Association at the age of thirty-three, at the Access to Justice hearings of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee. He also chaired the ABA's National Conference on Legal Services and the Public. Tom also served as co-chair of a Joint Commission of the Chicago Bar Association and the Illinois State Bar Association to survey the legal needs of the citizens of Illinois, which was instrumental in devising better ways for the Illinois Bar to meet the legal needs of the indigent. He was one of the founders of the Lawyers Trust Fund of Illinois, a major funding source for legal aid offices across the state, and served as Chancellor of the Academy of Illinois Lawyers.

He was the author of numerous articles for professional journals and delivered major speeches at meetings of the American Bar Association and fourteen different state bar associations. In 1997, he received the Illinois State Bar Association's highest award for a lifetime of service to the public and the profession. In 2005, he was named a Laureate of the Academy of Illinois Lawyers.

Mr. Johnson was a staunch supporter of the cause of education as Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Illinois Institute for Continuing Legal Education, member of the Board of Governors of Regents College in London, and member of the Board of Trustees of Eastern Illinois University. In 1990, he chaired a state bar association task force to determine how best to respond to bigotry and hate speech on college and university campuses and was the author of the final report of the task force, "If Words Could Kill."

For over twenty-five years he served as President of the Board of Directors of Premier Boys State, which conducts an annual week-long conference on the campus of Eastern Illinois University, and in which nearly thirty-five thousand students participated during his years of service to one of Illinois' preeminent youth leadership organizations.

In 1989, he received the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters from Rockford College for his service to the cause of education.

Tom was also a student of Illinois history, where he worked to preserve our state's proud Lincoln heritage. He chaired the Lincoln Bicentennial Commission of Winnebago County and was instrumental in the creation of the Lincoln Courthouse Square. He served on the national board of the Abraham Lincoln Association -- America's oldest and largest organization devoted to documenting, preserving, and celebrating our nation's Lincoln heritage.

He was a Trustee, Regent and most recently, Chancellor of the Lincoln Academy of Illinois, which administers the Order of Lincoln, our state's highest award, presented to six distinguished Illinoisans by the Governor of Illinois each year.

Survived by sister, Phyllis Stigman of Rockford, and several nieces and nephews. Predeceased by parents; brother, Theodore Johnson; and sister, Joyce Johnson.

Tom's unequalled manner and generous support of his family, friends, colleagues and the legal profession will be long missed.

Memorial services will be announced at a later date.

Memorial gifts may be sent to: The Lincoln Academy of Illinois, One Old State Capital Plaza, Springfield, IL 62701; or Prairie State Legal Services, c/o Administrative Office, 303 North Main Street, Suite 600, Rockford, IL 61101. Olson Funeral & Cremation Services, Ltd. assisted the family with arrangements.

To share a memory or online condolence, visit olsonfh.com

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