



## Donald Robert Fretz

June 25, 1922 - July 31, 2014

"Fantastic!" was Judge Donald R. Fretz's response to any queries of "How are you?" In his later years, he was also known for launching into a memorized recitation of the complete Gettysburg Address. He last recited it 12 hours before his death, on July 31, 2014. He only required a little prompting by his granddaughter. Don was born on June 25, 1922, in the rural town of Fort Wayne, Indiana. He was the eldest of three children born to Harold Herbert Fretz and Hilda Keen Fretz. The family later moved to the small central Indiana town of Tipton. Don began his collegiate education at Depauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, but that effort was interrupted by World War II. Don spent four years in the Army Air Corps. He served in several capacities, including time spent as a bomb site instructor, and a stint in the Judge Advocate's office at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland. He attained the rank of captain. After his military service, Don returned to Depauw, and earned his BA degree. He later attended Stanford University Law School, and University of San Francisco School of Law (USF), from which he earned his Juris Doctor degree in 1950. Don married Elizabeth Ragsdale, of Columbia, Missouri, in 1947. They made their first home in Palo Alto, California, while Don attended Stanford Law School, and the USF School of Law. In 1950, the couple moved from Palo Alto to the Central Valley town of Merced, California. They had three children, Ann, Elinor (Lin), and Holly. Don and Beth were divorced after a long marriage, but they remained friends. Don began his law career in Merced. During his 12 years in private practice, he first worked as an

attorney in the law firm of Preston, Braught, and George, later adding part-time public defender duties, and finally establishing his own private practice. In 1962, Don was elected to the Merced County Superior Court. At the time, he was one of the youngest ever elected to that position. Don served as a Superior Court judge in Merced County from 1963 until his retirement from that position in 1989. During his tenure as a judge in Merced, Don was known as a strict, but fair, jurist. One example of his judicial temperament, was a case related to Cesar Chavez, leader of the United Farm Workers. At the conclusion of the case involving the new, and controversial, farmworkers association, Chavez shook Don's hand and expressed his appreciation for what he felt was Don's exceptional fairness in dealing with the matter. In the varied calendar of cases judges are called upon to conduct, two of the bench assignments Don most enjoyed were finalizing adoptions of children, and swearing in new citizens. In addition to performing his judicial duties, Don used his status as a judge to assist, and to inspire, numerous students to become lawyers. One such student later went on to become a law professor at Harvard University. After his retirement from the Superior Court in Merced, Don moved to Napa in 1990, and started a new life. However, his interest in judicial matters never waned. Once in Napa, Don began working for Judicial Arbitration and Mediation Services (JAMS), an organization that offers both business and individual arbitration services designed to resolve legal disputes. During this time, he also worked as an assigned judge in several counties, including Napa County; until his final retirement in 2009, at the age of 88. During his judicial career, Don was known for mentoring fellow judges and for his masterful management of settlement conferences. His negotiating skills often helped disputants settle their differences before going to trial. This saved the county courts and the litigants time and money. One of his techniques was to offer "settlement drops" (i.e. lemon drops) to both parties in a dispute, before the start of negotiations; thus putting them at ease, and starting off tense discussions with a laugh. Over the course of his almost 50-year career as a judge, Don had a passion for judicial education both his own and that of

others. In order to further his own knowledge, he attended a session of the National College of State Trial Judges, which was held in Boulder, Colorado. This educational forum, designed to offer judicial training to new judges from all 50 states, would later relocate to Reno, Nevada, and become known as the National Judicial College. After starting as a student there, Don later became a well-respected teacher at the national college, serving as a faculty member from 1967 to 1989. Don's experience at the National Judicial College inspired his dream of establishing a similar educational program, which would be tailored to the needs of judges in California. He, along with others, worked hard to obtain the resources necessary to make their vision a reality. In 1967, he served as the first dean of the California Judicial College, located in Berkeley, California. He is often referred to as the "father of the California Judicial College". During his career as a judicial educator, Don authored many publications for judges, including Ethics for Judges and Courts and the News Media. He also served as the first president of the California Judges' Association (CJA), for which he was honored at the 2014 CJA Annual Conference in Monterey. In addition to his professional life as a lawyer, and later as a judge, Don dedicated a great deal of his private time to community service organizations and activities. He was active in the Boy Scouts of America, serving as a troop leader in Merced, and later held various positions at the local and regional levels. He was awarded the Silver Beaver, scouting's highest honor, for his lifelong dedication to the organization. He also served on the school board in Merced, and was an active member of numerous community and fraternal organizations. A few of these were: Rotary, Kiwanis, Masons, and Shriners. (Ahh those Kiwanis pancake breakfasts!) In addition to time spent in legal, judicial, and community service, Don found time to pursue his wide-ranging interests. He was interested in wine, and was a member of the Napa Valley Wine Tasters. He loved gardening, growing camellias, and was a founding member of the Napa Valley Camellia Society. Each year, during camellia season (February and March) he and Fran travelled to

camellia shows throughout Northern and Central California to display their flowers. Don was also a judge at these shows. Don loved traveling, not just to camellia shows, but farther afield, including trips to Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and China. An avid fisherman, Don took many trips to Alaska, to fish with his brother, George, on the Kenai River. In 1994, he claimed the George Fretz Boat Record for a 72-pound salmon. Don also had a life-long interest in family genealogy, helping to research, and write, two of the five volumes of the Fretz Family History. He was a frequent contributor to the Fretz Family Newsletter. Don had a powerful drive to improve himself, and he displayed a lifelong thirst for knowledge that was never quenched. An avid reader until the last three days of his life, he read several books a week. He also read several newspapers cover to cover each day, often tearing out articles of interest to discuss with others. Don was a long-standing member of a group of fellow scholars who met monthly to mull over "big ideas", a forum for discussion that he cherished. He also enjoyed participating in a weekly current events discussion group at the Meadows. One thread visible throughout Don's long life was his desire to make and keep connections with other people. Don made friends in school, in military service, in professional circles, in community service, and in pursuing his many interests. He cherished those friendships, and made every effort to maintain them. Don is survived by his significant other, Fran Kane, who filled the last 20 years of his life with much joy. He is also survived by his three daughters: Ann Fretz-Scott (spouse Ernie), Elinor (Lin) Wapner (spouse Roger), and Holly Ford. Fran's daughter Karyn Kane Williams (spouse Doug) also survives him. His grandchildren are Brandon Scott, Warren Ford, Nathaniel Ford, Sarah Wapner, and Fran's grandson, Kane Williams. Elizabeth (Beth) Fretz, who shared 33 years of marriage with Don, also survives him. In addition, he is survived by his sister Margaret Harper of Indiana. His brother, George Fretz, preceded him in death. He is also survived by his nieces and nephews, Debby Floyd, David Fretz, Drew Fretz, Stephen Harper, and Linda Boyer. His nephews Doug Fretz and David Harper predeceased him. He has

grandnieces, grandnephews, great-grandnieces and great-grandnephews in Indiana, Texas, New York, Missouri and Arizona. A memorial service to honor Don's life will be 3 p.m., Saturday, Aug. 16, at the First United Methodist Church of Napa, 625 Randolph St., Napa, CA 94559. If you have memories of Don, or wish to send condolences, you may address them to either Fran Kane, 1800 Atrium Parkway, Apt. 342, Napa, CA 94559; or to Lin (Fretz) Wapner, 281 Rosita Dr., Boulder Creek, CA 95006. In lieu of flowers, please consider making a contribution, in Don's memory; to the educational institution, community organization, or charity of your choice. Some causes that Don supported during his lifetime were: Depauw University, University of San Francisco Law School, Queen of the Valley Foundation, First United Methodist Church of Napa, Mt. Diablo Council of Boy Scouts, and Napa Rotary Club.

# Tribute Wall



“ 1 file added to the album *Obituary Wall*



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**Treadway & Wigger Funeral Chapel & Crematory** - February 05, 2020 at 09:26 AM



“ *Donald Robert Fretz*

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November 19, 2019 at 12:00 AM