

United States District Court
District of Nebraska
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ROBERT F. ROSSITER, JR.
Chief United States District Judge

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PRESS RELEASE

The Honorable Richard G. Kopf passed away on Friday, January 17. Judge Kopf was nominated by President George H.W. Bush on April 7, 1992, to serve on the United States District Court for the District of Nebraska. Judge Kopf was confirmed by the United States Senate on May 21, 1992, and received his commission on May 26, 1992. Upon Judge Kopf's appointment, then-Senator Bob Kerrey predicted that his career as a federal district judge would be "one of genuine distinction." This prediction proved to be entirely accurate.

Chief Judge Robert F. Rossiter, Jr. said of Judge Kopf: "Judge Richard G. Kopf embodied everything a judge should be: just, fair, and unwavering in his commitment to the law. He was a leader, and a steadfast advocate for transparency in the judiciary, believing that openness in the legal process is essential to maintaining public trust and accountability. We will remember his sharp wit and his ability to bring humor to even the most serious matters, reminding us all that a moment of levity can coexist with the pursuit of justice. Judge Kopf was a great man, and he will be deeply missed by our Court family, the Nebraska bar, and the community at large. I was proud to call him my colleague and my friend."

Judge Kopf was born in Toledo, Ohio, and graduated from Kearney State College (now the University of Nebraska at Kearney) in 1969. He earned his law degree from the University of Nebraska College of Law in 1972. Following law school, he served as a law clerk to United States Circuit Judge Donald R. Ross for two years. He then spent the next 12 years in private practice in Nebraska. Before becoming a district judge, Judge Kopf served as a United States Magistrate Judge from 1987 to 1992. He served as the district's chief judge from 1999 to 2004.

Judge Kopf was widely recognized for his leadership in advancing court technology. Under his direction as chief judge, the District of Nebraska became the first paperless federal court in the nation. In addition, Judge Kopf guided the district through a period of significant adversity. During his tenure as chief judge, the court's judicial resources were reduced by 25%, while the District of Nebraska's federal criminal caseload tripled the national per-judge average. Despite these challenges, Judge Kopf's leadership resulted in the district judges trying 68% more cases than the average district judge, and ranking among the top in the nation for the timely disposition of civil and criminal cases.

Recognizing that justice delayed is justice denied, Judge Kopf assigned himself a double caseload to ensure his high standards were met.

Judge Kopf was Board Chair of the Historical Society of the United States Courts of the Eighth Circuit from 2005 to 2020 and served as President from 2001 to 2005. He strongly believed in the Society's mission to preserve and celebrate the rich history of the federal courts in the seven states of the Eighth Circuit, including Nebraska.

Judge Kopf rendered hundreds of decisions during his years on the federal bench, earning a reputation for writing fair, frank, and honest opinions. He also had a remarkable sense of humor and an uncanny ability to blend legal reasoning with cultural references. In one opinion, Judge Kopf was asked to restrain a high school from prohibiting a student—who had twice violated the school's ban on consuming alcohol—from playing baseball. Judge Kopf determined a temporary restraining order was not warranted. In his decision, he quoted Ernest Lawrence Thayer's *Casey at the Bat* in its entirety. He went on to write, "[e]xcept in the most compelling cases, public schools should be run by those assigned by elected officials to run them, and not by geezers wearing black robes. While I know a fair amount about baseball and beer, I know virtually nothing about educating and disciplining high school students who drink beer and play baseball." This passage perfectly captured Judge Kopf's spirited sense of humor, intelligence, and candor.

Judge Kopf was a dedicated judge with a tremendous passion for the law. The judges and staff of the United States District Court mourn his loss. He was a trusted colleague, mentor, and friend. Our hearts and prayers are with Judge Kopf's family and loved ones.