

# Thaddeus Kowalski, 1931-2011

## Retired judge cooperated in the undercover Operation Greylord probe of the 1980s

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Cook County Judge Thaddeus Kowalski cooperated with federal authorities who took down a raft of corrupt judges during Operation Greylord in the 1980s.

Judge Kowalski knew his cooperation endangered his career, but he helped with the cases because he saw judicial corruption as an intolerable assault on the legal system's integrity, said his wife of 42 years, Patricia.

"He never looked back and never regretted standing against things he thought were wrong, and I think that was typical of him. He never hesitated to do what he believed was the right thing," said Judge Tom Donnelly of Cook County Circuit Court, who knew Judge Kowalski for nearly two decades.

Judge Kowalski, 79, who was known to his friends as Ted, died Monday, June 27, at home in [Chicago's](#) Lincoln Park neighborhood after a struggle with cancer diagnosed after he retired from the bench in 2002.

Though he attracted praise for helping the federal investigation that netted dozens of judges and lawyers, he also was proud of his work to steer young offenders away from gangs, his wife said.

He founded the Gang Free program at the Branch 29 court near Belmont and Western avenues, giving up his Monday nights from 1993 to 2000 to meet with offenders on probation, she said.

Once, when he was assigned the duty of performing courthouse marriages for a day, a groom told his new wife he needed a moment to speak with the judge, Patricia Kowalski said. The man had been through the Gang Free program.

"This young man said, 'You saved my life,'" she said.

Judge Kowalski, a Chicago native, graduated from the [University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign](#) before serving in [the Army](#), his family said. After graduating from Northwestern University Law School, he worked as a public defender in Cook County from 1964 to 1980, when he was appointed associate judge, his wife said.

Judge Kowalski was known to ride the bus to court every day, traveling on occasion alongside defendants due to appear before him. It never gave him pause, friends and family members said.

Such an approach also framed Judge Kowalski's commitment to the unassuming courtroom where he spent much of his judicial career. The cramped room with worn carpeting and

fluorescent lighting had no jury box, and the judge's chambers had no window, Donnelly said.

"It had no opulence, but for him, it was the [U.S. Supreme Court](#) because he believed it was the court closest to the lives of ordinary citizens," Donnelly said.

In addition to dispensing justice to defendants, he also distinguished himself during Operation Greylord, a probe that unveiled bribery and corruption among Cook County judges and lawyers. In spite of the risks, he testified against several judges, according to Tribune archives.

"It was just the right thing, the way I was taught. I can sleep well," he told a Tribune reporter for a 1986 story.

He also drew attention with a 1993 legal decision that held Chicago's anti-gang loitering law to be unconstitutional. The U.S. Supreme Court later struck down the law.

While he was committed to his legal career, he also gave time to social organizations and crossed the stage at Lyric Opera productions as a supernumerary, the rough equivalent of an extra in the [opera](#) world, his wife said. He was also a dedicated father, said his son David.

"He was probably the most caring and supportive individual I have ever met," his son said. "I was really lucky."

Judge Kowalski also is survived by another son, Neil, and four grandchildren.

A visitation is planned for Wednesday from 11 a.m. to noon, followed by Mass in St. Clement Catholic Church, 642 W. Deming Place, Chicago.