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News

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Former Charleston lawyer Stanley Preiser honored

by [Ry Rivard](#)
Daily Mail staff

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Former Charleston attorney Stanley Preiser was inducted into the American Trial Lawyer Hall of Fame last week, joining the ranks of Johnny Cochran, Thurgood Marshall and Clarence Darrow.

Preiser's skill and charismatic courtroom presence made him one of the most highly sought lawyers in the state for many years.

He successfully defended Gov. Arch Moore in his first trial on extortion charges in 1976 and represented Dee Caperton in her 1989 multi-million dollar divorce from former Gov. Gaston Caperton.

Preiser was inducted at a hall of fame ceremony for living lawyers last week in Las Vegas along with Bobby Lee Cook, who TV character Matlock is patterned after; the two founders of the Southern Poverty Law Center; and Gerry Spence, the Wyoming lawyer who never lost a criminal case in 50 years of practicing law.

Preiser, now 81, lives in Boca Raton, Fla. For the past several years, he has done consulting work for a Florida law firm.

"I'm still tough as hell and mean as can be," he said in a phone interview.

Preiser said he was as good as he was because he prepared.

"I worked very hard. You'd always find my lights on until two in the morning and then back on at six in the morning," he said.

Preiser said that like a lot of successful trial lawyers he used to take part in sports, including football and boxing.

"Most trial lawyers are athletes, because that's how they got tough," he said.

His stamina put several lawyers who worked him into the hospital for exhaustion, said Preiser's son Monty, a former lawyer who now writes about wine.

Monty said in the days before the Internet, his father would make sure he had as many boxes and papers with him as possible.

"We always went in with more paper and boxes than anybody," he said.

There was also Preiser's manner, which is described in "Jury Selection," a guide to selecting jury members by V. Hale Starr and Mark McCormick.

"An ex-boxer, his stance is that of one ready to fight. His voice is low yet clear, and

write. "He looks pleased to be here, in his natural habitat, where he anticipates with a thrill every act and word."

One technique the book noted is that Preiser "strolls over to the opposing attorney greeting him sincerely and warmly, placing a hand on his shoulder (to keep him down, seated) while he exchanges greetings and quips."

Soon, the book said, even the judge is asking him it's a convenient time to break for lunch.

That courtroom presence and the taxing work hours are still remembered by some of Charleston's best-known lawyers, many of whom he trained.

"He could try anything. He was just a force of energy that I've never seen in a courtroom before or since," said William Druckman, whose specialty is medical malpractice suits. Druckman worked with Preiser for several years in Charleston starting in 1981. "It's like watching Pavarotti sing.

"He would tell you vanilla was chocolate and you believe it by the time his argument was done."

"Perfect preparation makes perfect trials and he was just a huge believer. Stanley didn't wing it. Everything was planned and researched."

But Preiser also made preparing for legal maneuvers about more than just the case at hand, said Will Steele, who worked with Preiser in the early 1980's and is now a federal administrative law judge in Cleveland.

"If it was a Fourth Amendment problem, we were fighting for the existence of the United States Constitution - the work he did transcended its importance to the client," he said.

Ted Kanner, a Charleston lawyer, said he learned a lot from Preiser when he worked with him from 1978 to 1985.

"He was a lawyer's lawyer. He is truly deserving of the superlatives," Kanner said.

Preiser said courts have changed since he started in 1950.

"Lawyers getting out of school are too money hungry," he said.

"In addition, I think we have judges today who are not as conscientious as they used to be," Preiser said. "Justice is the search for justice for all mankind and I think judges have lost sight of that."

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