

Ernst Mueller, 1942-2011: Jacksonville lawyer's fairness inspired others



By [David Hunt](#)

Ernst Mueller, a prominent figure in Jacksonville's legal community who had prosecuted Medellin cartel co-founder Carlos Lehder, died Thursday after a three-year struggle with Lou Gehrig's disease. He was 69.

His wife, Nancy Mueller, said her husband never complained about his condition although it robbed him of two things he loved: his work and his singing voice for the choir at Lakewood Presbyterian Church.

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis is the medical term for the gradual, irreversible paralysis affecting Mr. Mueller's nervous system since at least 2008 when he was diagnosed.

Mr. Mueller had lost his ability to speak. His fingers were becoming too stiff to type emails.

Wheelchair-bound and on a feeding tube but still generally comfortable, he put some of his last thoughts on paper to share with his wife shortly before he died.

It was time to let go, he wrote, before things got worse.

"It was quite a shock," she said. "I thought we would have a little more time."

Friends and colleagues remember Mr. Mueller as a man of tremendous analytical ability who treated everyone and their ideas with respect. He seldom finished work before 8 p.m. and didn't use a late quitting time as an excuse to bypass a trip to the gym, even if it meant he'd be eating dinner at 10 p.m.

U.S. District Magistrate Thomas Morris, a longtime friend, remembered a man strong enough to water ski just five years ago. Even last April, Mr. Mueller helped to raise about \$11,000 for research of his disease in the "Walk to Defeat ALS."

Mr. Mueller was born in Germany. His father was killed when the German army deployed him against the Russians during World War II. His mother later met an American soldier and decided to follow him home.

At age 7, with no ability to speak English, Mr. Mueller boarded a plane to start his new life in Philadelphia. With the war still shaping the American psyche, his German accent started the occasional schoolyard fight, his wife said.

"It prepared him to be a prosecutor," she said with a laugh.

Mr. Mueller earned his law degree from Duke University and came to Jacksonville to clerk for a federal judge in the 1970s. He later became an assistant U.S. attorney and went to work for city General Counsel's Office.

He put away Lehder and also prosecuted baseball star Denny McLain on racketeering charges amid a career that other Jacksonville lawyers have used as inspiration.

"He is one of the main reasons I am a judge today," said Circuit Judge Virginia Norton, who worked with Mueller in the city General Counsel's Office before her election to the bench. "Ernst taught first and foremost to always be fair. Be fair to your client and be fair to the other side."

Former General Counsel Rick Mullaney remembered a man who, even after being diagnosed, kept long hours to finish cases.

"I always admired his honesty and directness," Mullaney said.

In addition to his wife, Mr. Mueller is survived by three sons.

The family is planning a memorial service at Lakewood Presbyterian Church and asks that any memorial contributions be made to The ALS Association's Florida Chapter, 3242 Parkside Center Circle, Tampa, FL 33619.

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