

Norm Wolfinger: Former state attorney dead at age 70



2008 file photo of Norm Wolfinger, Brevard-Seminole State Attorney.

(Norm Wolfinger)



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Norman R. "Norm" Wolfinger, who served as elected state attorney for Seminole and Brevard counties for 28 years, has died.

He died at home Tuesday night in Titusville after a year-long battle with cancer, co-workers said. He was 70.

Wolfinger retired in 2012, opting not to campaign and seek another four-year term. His cancer diagnosis came later, said Phil Archer, his successor.

"His advice to me when I took over and won was, 'Do the right thing, and you will sleep at night.' More than anything he'll be remembered for his integrity and sense of right and wrong," Archer said today.

Wolfinger spent little time in the courtroom in later years but in 1987, after gunman William Cruse went on a killing spree, opening fire at a Palm Bay shopping center and killing six people – two of them police officers - Wolfinger personally handled the case.

He convinced jurors that Cruse was not insane and deserved to die.

"What type of mercy did he give to the six victims who were brutally murdered on April 23, 1987?" Wolfinger asked jurors. "May God have mercy on the defendant's soul, but for his cruel, atrocious and uncaring acts, the evidence has shown this defendant has forfeited his right to live on this earth."

Cruse died on Florida's death row Nov. 29, 2009.

Wolfinger grew up in Wilson Borough, PA., and was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1968. The following year, at age 23, he suffered a severe leg injury during combat in Vietnam, something that left him permanently disabled.

He came home and went to law school at the University of Florida then spent the bulk of his career as a government attorney, initially as an assistant state attorney then as chief assistant public defender.

He was elected state attorney in 1984.

He was beloved by many of the attorneys and staffers who worked for him. Some were in tears Wednesday.

"I think his passion for life was contagious," said his son Rob Wolfinger, of Titusville. "He just loved to make people laugh. He made everyone in his life feel special."

During Wolfinger's tenure, two innocent Brevard County men who each served more than 20 years in prison were cleared by new DNA evidence and freed.

William Dillon had served 28 years after being convicted of murder, and Wilton Dedge had been locked up for 22 years after jurors found him guilty of raping and repeatedly slashing a 17-year-old girl.

Those convictions happened before Wolfinger was elected, but his office, at times, fought new DNA testing that eventually cleared them. He also opposed a state payout of \$1.35 million to Dillon, something made by Gov. Rick Scott, along with an apology.

Archer on Wednesday said news coverage about those cases troubled Wolfinger.

"I know it bothered him a great deal because he was truly concerned about those cases," Archer said.

For his service in Vietnam, Wolfinger was awarded a Purple Heart and Vietnam Combat Medal. In 2007 he was named the nation's Outstanding Disabled American Veteran.

In 2006 then-U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales named Wolfinger and his staff the Outstanding Local Prosecutor's Office, due to an initiative to crack down on gun violence.

Wolfinger was a victims' rights innovator, according to his office, becoming up one of the state's first prosecutors to set up a program specifically to support victims.

He was an aggressive prosecutor but also liked to unwind.

"He was a huge Florida Gator fan and would wear an orange wig to the games," said Archer.

He also loved to relax at a cabin his family bought in the Georgia mountains.

Wolfinger also is survived by his wife, Jane, of Titusville; daughter Amy Harlan of Beckley, WV; sisters Jean Houck of Port Charlotte and Joan Walter of Hudson; and two grandchildren.

Visitation is scheduled Thursday, Jan. 14, from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. at Park Avenue Baptist Church in Titusville. His funeral is set for Friday, Jan. 15 at 10 a.m. at the same church.

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