

## **Memorial to Honorable Robert M. Summitt**

As prepared and presented by Virginia Anne Summitt Sharber

My father, the Honorable Robert Murray Summitt, was born Jan. 14, 1924, on a farm in Sweetwater, Tennessee. The fourth of five children, he was educated in the Monroe County public schools. Following graduation from Sweetwater High School in 1942, Dad joined the war effort serving in the Naval Aviation and Army Infantry, and earning a Medal of Meritorious Service. Military service remained of importance to him even after the war and he had a long tenure in the Air Force Reserve, retiring as a Lieutenant Colonel.

Following the war, he did his undergraduate studies on the GI bill at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, where he was a member of Sigma Alpha Epsilon, and graduated from the University of Tennessee School of Law in 1949. Upon graduation, he moved to Chattanooga to begin his law career with fellow Monroe County native and mentor Estes Kefauver. Dad worked as an associate with the law firm of Spears, Reynolds, Moore and Rebman. In 1956 he formed the firm Cunningham, Crutchfield and Summitt and then in 1963 co-founded Coffey and Summitt, where he was joined by law partner and friend Tom O'Neal in 1965.

In addition to his private practice, Dad was the Hamilton County attorney for 11 years, was the attorney for the Hamilton County School Board, and served for almost 10 years as Hamilton County Coroner and even briefly as Hamilton County Sheriff.

In 1964, Dad won the Democratic nomination for the U.S. House of Representatives for the 3rd district of Tennessee. He lost in a close race in the general election, but while campaigning, got to meet Presidents Kennedy and Johnson and ride on Air Force One.

In 1968, Governor Buford Ellington appointed Dad to an opening on the bench of the First Division, Eleventh Judicial District of Tennessee. He was elected to a full eight-year term in 1974 and re-elected in 1982 and 1990 before retiring in 1998.

Dad was honored to serve as a judge, always listening closely to all sides of a disputed issue and carefully explaining to jurors the seriousness with which they needed to take their responsibility. He especially enjoyed welcoming and mentoring the newest members of the litigation bar to the practice of law.

During his years on the bench, Dad served as President of the Tennessee Judicial Conference, Chair of the National Conference of State Trial Judges, as a member of the house of Delegates for the American Bar Association, faculty of the National Judicial College, and was appointed by the Tennessee Supreme Court to the Court of Judiciary.

Dad also was committed to community service. He was Chairman of the Cherokee Area Council of the Boys Scouts, past State Commander and on the National Executive Committee of the American Legion, President of the Chattanooga Armed Forces Celebration, and President of the Sons of the American Revolution. He sat on the UTC Advisory Board and the board of the Tennessee River Gorge Trust and was a member of the board of the Salvation Army for over 60

years. He was a long-time member of the Downtown Rotary Club, a 33rd Degree Mason, a member of York and Scottish Rites, and a life member of Alhambra Temple.

He received numerous accolades for his commitment to his community, from the Jaycee's Young Man of the Year in 1959 to the Tennessee Bar Association's award for exceptional service in 2011. In addition, he received the Boy Scouts' Silver Beaver Award, the Sertoma Club's National Heritage Award, and the Chattanooga Bar Association's Ralph H. Kelly Humanitarian Award.

Dad was a long-time member of First Centenary United Methodist Church where he served as a School teacher and on the Board of Trustees.

He was a life-long learner, routinely auditing classes at UTC up until just a few years ago. I still remember one of my former law partners expressing some astonishment to me (and probably some intimidation) that the student roster for the Constitution Law class he was about to teach at UTC included the name of Judge Robert M. Summitt.

Dad passed away peacefully at home on June 16, 2018, having squeezed a lot of living out of his 94 years. He was preceded in death by his wife Florence Varnell Summitt with whom he shared 46 years of marriage. He was an incredible life partner to Mom and a wonderful father to me, my sister Laura and my brothers Robert Jr. and Martin. He warmly welcomed into the family my husband Hugh, Laura's husband Doug and Martin's wife Meghan and was incredibly proud of his grandchildren Kate, Meg and Evan Sharber and his wife Erica, and Sarah, Margaret and Charlie Summitt.

Dad was a loving son and brother, husband, father, grandfather and friend. He was determined and principled. Never shy about asking questions to get to know someone better or in offering his thoughts or suggestions, Dad was a man who never met a stranger and a life-long learner. He was empathetic and apt to form relationships, not because of some useful expediency, but because he had a genuine interest in other people's lives and perspectives, frequently using his many talents to make a positive difference in their lives.

I always thought how fitting the "your honor" title was for my dad. He was very intentional about living an honorable life, believing in always treating everyone fairly and with respect. Through his service in the military, his legal and judicial career, his many volunteer commitments and his devotion to church and family, I believe the life he lived truly made our community a better place for everyone.

Therefore, Be it Resolved this 12th day of June, 2019 that this memorial in honor of the Honorable Robert M. Summitt be entered in the minutes of the Tennessee Judicial Conference and published accordingly.