Revered RI judge famed for colorful wordplay

PASSAGES BRUCE M. SELYA

Supreme Court's Jackson was among his clerks

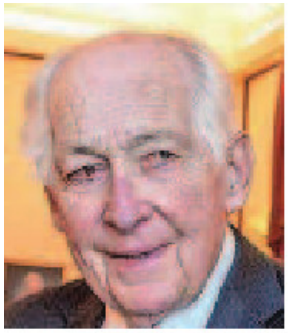
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Providence Journal USA TODAY NETWORK

Bruce M. Selya, a celebrated judge and the first person of Jewish faith to ascend the federal bench in Rhode Island, has died at 90.

Known for his expansive vocabulary and distinctive writing style, Selya was a nationally renowned jurist as well as a revered figure in the local community.

"Rhode Island has lost a legal legend whose outstanding contributions to the community and the people of Rhode Island go well beyond his four decades of remarkable service on the federal bench," U.S. Sen. Jack Reed said in a statement on Sunday.



Selya

Selya was born and raised in Providence. His father, a chemical engineer, founded Isochem Resins Co. in Lincoln.

He attended local public schools, including Nathan Bishop Middle School and Classical High School, and

went on to graduate with honors from Harvard University and Harvard Law School. A scholarship and a job at a clothing store in Harvard Square paid his way, as did the extra money he made "cleaning up at the bridge table," he later told the Providence Journal.

Later, he'd joke that he returned "as quickly as I could to Providence" after seven years in Massachusetts.

Selya's father wanted him to go into business, according to a 1982 profile in the Providence Journal. But he was inspired to go to Harvard Law School after meeting three prominent alumni as an undergraduate: Supreme Court Justice and American Civil Liberties Union founder Felix Frankfurter, former secretary of state Dean Acheson, and Providence native and legal scholar Zechariah Chafee Jr.

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After clerking for Edward V. Day, the chief judge for the U.S. District Court of Rhode Island, Selya spent the next two decades of his career in private practice. He specialized in trial work and also played in an active role in local Republican politics, running unsuccessfully for attorney general and serving as part of Gov. John Chafee's unofficial "kitchen cabinet." He also chaired Chafee's successful campaign for U.S. Senate.

At Chafee's recommendation, President Ronald Reagan nominated Selya to be a U.S. District Court judge in 1982, then elevated him to the 1st U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals four years later. Once seated on the bench, Selya embraced political neutrality, and didn't even vote in primaries.

In later years, Selya also served as chief judge of the United States Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court of Review, which reviews government requests for electronic surveillance warrants. He held that position until 2012.

Selya assumed senior status on the 1st Circuit in 2006, but continued working a full schedule and hearing cases until his death. He was part of a panel that upheld Rhode Island's high-capacity magazine ban last year.

In 2022, he told the Providence Journal that he was still working five-day weeks starting at 7 a.m., though he sometimes needed staff to read for him due to his diminished eyesight.

Over the course of his legal career, Selya authored more than 1,800 opinions, and became known for his use of arcane words and playful writing style. He credited his Latin education at Classical High School, as well as a desire to make legal writing more interesting.

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"I spent 22 years being paid extravagant sums for work that included reading judicial opinions and often found myself struggling to stay awake," he told a legal website in 2004. "Upon my appointment to the bench, I made a commitment to myself that I would attempt to prove that sound jurisprudence and interesting prose are not mutually exclusive."

Holding firm to that commitment, Selya casually scattered words like "abcedarian," "philotheoparoptesism," "thamaturgical," and "rodomontade" in his opinions, sending lawyers scrambling for their dictionaries.

An opinion involving the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union included phrases like "plaintiffs' own filings place them in the tightest of corsets," the New York Times noted in a 1992 story on his wordplay.

Among his "Selyaisms": "We find this to be a ketchup-bottle type of argument: it looks quite full, but it is remarkably difficult to get anything useful out of it."

"While Rumpelstiltskin is said to have converted dross into gold, the agency cannot convert evidence favorable to an alien into evidence unfavorable to the alien simply by ignoring the context of such evidence."

"[T]he appellant's asseverational array is all meringue and no pie."

In a 2023 interview with Bryant University, Selya recalled a compliment that stuck with him: "Most opinions are written in gray. Yours are written in pastels."

Selya was also known for mentoring hundreds of law clerks over the years. Many of them went on to prominent legal careers of their own – the most notable example being U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson.

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In her memoir, Jackson recalls Selya as a "brilliant, meticulous, and scholarly" man who "had an oldworld courtliness about him, and an erudite way of expressing himself that extended to his decisions," and would go to battle over the correct placement of a comma.

"Bruce Selya's legacy as one of the great American appellate judges will endure for a long time to come," 1st Circuit Judge Jeffrey R. Howard said in a statement on Sunday.

“But what the countless lawyers who learn the law from reading his erudite and clear-eyed opinions do not know is that Judge Selya was a mentor to nearly every federal appellate and trial judge in our circuit who came after him.”

Outside the courtroom, Selya served on the board of local institutions including the Jewish Federation of Rhode Island, Bryant University, Roger Williams University School of Law, and the Rhode Island Historical Society. He was the founding chairman of the board of directors for the Lifespan health system.

“As a judge, Bruce Selya was nationally renowned and respected and set a high bar that many others in his profession admire and aspire to reach,” Reed said. “As a man, he will be remembered for his exemplary devotion to the law and uplifting others, particularly those in his beloved hometown of Providence.”

The city of Providence ceremonially designated Fulton Street, which runs alongside Rhode Island’s federal courthouse, as Judge Selya Way in 2023.

“I’ve always been in awe of how a son of Providence … went on to such a spot of national importance,” Samuel Salganik, a former clerk, said at the time. “He’s a nationally important judge and he did it all from his hometown.”

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Sen. Jack Reed

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