



Judge Alfred Laureta (center) at his Portrait Unveiling Ceremony at the District Court for the NMI on October 31, 2012.

Judge Alfred Laureta, 96

With sadness and admiration for a long and accomplished life, the District Court for the Northern Mariana Islands announces that Alfred Laureta, the first District Judge of the court, passed away peacefully on November 16, 2020 at the age of 96 in Kauai, Hawaii. His children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren were at his bedside. Judge Laureta was known for his deep love of his family and his unassuming, humble nature even as he blazed a trail for Filipino-Americans in the legal profession.

Indeed, Judge Laureta's career was marked by many firsts. He was the first Filipino-American to be appointed in Hawaii— or any state in the nation— as a gubernatorial cabinet officer, and a state court judge. In 1978, he became the first person of Filipino descent to serve as a federal judge. Judge Laureta was appointed by President Jimmy Carter and confirmed by the U.S. Senate as the first district judge to serve in the federal court for the Northern Mariana Islands where he presided until 1988.

Judge Laureta came from humble beginnings. The Garden Islands, a Kauai newspaper, reported that Judge Laureta was born at Banana Camp in Oahu as the only son of Filipino immigrant laborers. He worked his way through college at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and eventually landed a scholarship to Fordham University School of Law. In New York, Judge Laureta met his wife Evelyn, a nursing student, who passed away in 2012.

“I was fortunate to have met Judge Laureta in 2012, along with his children, Pamela, Michael and Gregory, when they visited Saipan for the portrait commissioning ceremony at the District Court,” said Chief Judge Ramona V. Manglona of the District Court for the Northern Mariana Islands. Judge Manglona honored her predecessors, Judge Laureta and Judge Alex R. Munson, by commissioning portraits of the two judges to hang in the courtroom. At the age of 88, Judge Laureta took a 10-hour flight from Kauai to Saipan with his three children to attend the event. Judge Manglona remembers the octogenarian as being jovial and energetic, with abundant fond memories of his time on Saipan. “He was truly a remarkable man who developed a deep love for the Northern Marianas.”

At the portrait unveiling ceremony, Judge Laureta recalled his introduction to Saipan at the District Court. He said the Northern Marianas was “a new country to me.” He added, “I did not know who the people were, and I didn’t know what their customs were, and I really didn’t know what to expect. But it was very simple, very easy for me to make an adjustment to become acquainted with whatever existed in terms of culture, customs or whatever.” He extended his gratitude to former Governor Carlos Camacho for paving the way for his appointment, Joe Lifoifo for introduction to the Carolinian customs, and David Sablan who introduced him to the Chamorro culture.

Judge Laureta’s law clerks also remember him as a man filled with humility, kindness and empathy. Howard K.K Luke recalls first arriving on Saipan with the judge in August 1978:

Saipan had just had the heaviest rainfall in recent recorded history. The first thing we saw upon arriving at the Saipan Intercontinental Inn was a car that was mostly underwater. The United States District Court was in a small room that had been hastily repaired, as it was heavily damaged from a fire from the kitchen area next to it not long before our arrival. We found a metal desk that served as the federal bench for the next several months. The modest house that Judge Laureta had been provided was drenched, and it took a couple of weeks of rolling up our sleeves and cleaning it before it was livable. Through it all, Judge Laureta was as happy as a clam. He was such a positive, humble, down-to-earth man, as much at home in shorts, a tee shirt, and rubber slippers as he was in black robes.

Luke shared Judge Laureta’s practice of sitting with his law clerks and listening carefully to their thoughts about the issues and cases before the court. Luke said, “He would ask us what we would do with respect to the cases before us. He took great pride in all of us, and believed we had an important role in helping him and visiting federal judges arrive at the correct decisions in all our cases. If you ask any of his former law clerks how they remember him, I have no doubt that all of us would feel deeply moved in recalling the wonderful years we were blessed with, working for this great man.” On a personal level, he recalls Judge Laureta mentioned that while in New York, Judge Laureta and his wife Evelyn double-dated with Thurgood Marshall and another nursing student.

Mike Belles, a law clerk from 1982 to 1983, said Judge Laureta remained a humble, decent and unassuming man throughout his life. “It was a privilege to work for this kind soul who cared about the law and jurisprudence and simply doing the right thing,” he said.

Former law clerk and recently retired federal magistrate judge for the Central District of California, Patrick Walsh, remembers Judge Laureta as a personable man full of kindness and humor “who tried hard to reach the right decision in all of his cases, big and small.” Judge Walsh recalled Judge Laureta telling him a bit about his humble beginnings. In that story, the judge and his fellow classmates in Hawaii decided to vote on whether to wear shoes for their eighth-grade graduation ceremony. Many of the students did not wear shoes because of the expense, coupled with the warm Hawaii weather. After the vote in favor of shoes prevailed, Judge Laureta had to go out and buy a pair.

Former law clerk (1981-1983) David Collins describes the judge as “a life-changing mentor and teacher who became a close friend throughout the subsequent decades.” He said the judge “treated everyone inside and outside of his court equally, with respect and dignity.”

The District Court for the Northern Mariana Islands extends its condolences to the family of Judge Laureta. Our sincerest thank you, Olomwaay and Si Yu’us Ma’ase for serving the court and our community with compassion and distinction.