

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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Meredith Getches, 1944-2008: Ex-Seattle hearing examiner admired for sense of humor

Last updated June 5, 2008 8:36 p.m. PT

By KATHY MULADY
P-I REPORTER

Meredith Getches respected the intelligence of citizens. She shared their deep sense of right and wrong, and their passion. During her 13 years as Seattle's hearing examiner, she often sided with neighbors, upending major projects proposed by the city, her employer.

Getches died Wednesday; she was 63. She was diagnosed with advanced cancer just five weeks ago after complaining about a back problem.

"It was very fast; everyone was shocked, including the doctors," said her brother, David Getches, of Colorado.

Getches was admired for her intelligence and sense of humor.

"She was a master of the one-liner; she would find irony and go after it. She was a great observer of political quirks at the highest levels and didn't hesitate to make fun," he said.

When Getches retired as hearing examiner in 2003, she said she would miss the people, the stories, the complex issues, the chance every day to learn something new.

"I like the interplay of people and facts," she said at the time.

Her keen observations enlivened hearings that often turned on tiny details of city code. Her humor lifted the tension when business owners faced neighbors and historic preservationists squared off with developers.

She was the first female hearing examiner in Seattle and decided some of the city's most controversial cases. Her decisions were rarely overturned on appeal. Getches approved the location of a facility for chronic alcoholics where they would be allowed to drink.

She also told the city that a plan to expand Woodland Park Zoo needed a traffic study.

Over the years, she gave the nod to off-leash dog areas and the sale of DeLaurenti Specialty Food Market in Pike Place Market. But Getches rejected Sur La Table's plans to expand its shop into a Market space left vacant when Molbak's moved out.

She also made decisions on more mundane cases, hearing disputes between residents and the city over tickets for junk-filled yards, dangerous-dog complaints, disputed tax bills and seized property.

Her sense of justice and principled stands carried over into her private life as well, said longtime friend Jalaine Madura.

"Whichever side of her you knew, you knew that she had her principles. She believed you should have your ethics and principles and that you should live and act on them," Madura said.

Getches was born in Pennsylvania, but her family moved to West Covina, Calif., while she was young. She started her career as a teacher at a Los Angeles inner-city high school and became an urban planning consultant in Santa Barbara, Calif.

Later, she earned her law degree from the University of Oregon. She had bachelor's degrees in history from the University of the Pacific, in environmental studies from the University of California-Santa Barbara and a Master's Program Certificate in Environmental Planning from California State University-Northridge. After leaving Seattle, she practiced law and was a hearing officer for Bainbridge Island.

Those wanting to remember her may contribute in her memory to Noel House, 120 Bell St., No. 103, Seattle.

Besides her brother, Getches is survived by her sister-in-law, Ann Getches; nephew Matthew Getches; nieces Catherine and Elizabeth Getches; and her former husband, Mark Wills of Arizona.

A memorial service will be held later in the summer; no date has been set yet.

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