

In the Court of Pennsylvania
Eastern District

In Memoriam

NANCY M. SOBOLEVITCH

Court Administrator of Pennsylvania

April 10, 2002
Courtroom 456
City Hall
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Proceedings

CHIEF JUSTICE ZAPPALA: This is a special ceremony which is a memorial ceremony for our past Court Administrator, Nancy Sobolevitch.

There is much I assume will be said about Nancy Sobolevitch, so I will reserve my remarks for a later time.

We have present in the courtroom to address the issue of Nancy, her past life and her accomplishments, first to address the Court, the Honorable Arlin Adams, former Chief Judge for the Court of Appeals, and a very dear friend.

Judge Adams?

JUDGE ADAMS: With submission to Your Honors, my name is Arlin Adams.

It's always a high privilege to be before this Court, and especially today on this solemn occasion.

Shortly after I retired from the Court of Appeals and returned to my former law firm as counsel, I received a telephone call from the Administrative Office of the Pennsylvania Courts requesting that I assist in several cases involving trial judges suspended by the Court or against whom the Court was considering some type of sanction.

Nancy Sobolevitch was then the Court Administrator, and as a result, I worked closely with her in these as well as other Court matters. I quickly became aware of her vast knowledge in the field of Judicial Administration, and her rare good judgment in handling sensitive judicial problems.

She was always available for consultation. She was also completely knowledgeable regarding the background of each of the matters, and she was always ready with suggestions on how to resolve these very difficult problems.

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In addition, she was completely intuitive about budget and administrative matters involving state government, as well as fiscal problems involving Philadelphia and other local governments.

When Nancy became too ill to carry on, I knew that I, as well as the Commonwealth, had lost a priceless resource. I realized, too, that state government has suffered a severe blow.

Many years ago Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, speaking to Learned Hand, said that a mark of excellence is to be able "to hammer out as compact and solid a piece of work as one can, to try to make it first rate, and then to leave it unadvertised."

That short, concise description, I suggest, would apply quite aptly to Nancy Sobolevitch.

I shall always be grateful that Nancy was my friend and advisor. She leaves a rich legacy in the field of Judicial Administration.

Thank you, Your Honors.

CHIEF JUSTICE ZAPPALA: Thank you, Judge Adams.

On behalf of our Court, Justice Newman.

JUSTICE NEWMAN: I see that Bob Sobolevitch is not here, so please tell him we are thinking about him, and this certainly was meant to include him, too.

When I was asked to speak at Nancy's eulogy on January 28, 2002, I was truly honored because I knew that Nancy was a woman who would be remembered by everybody.

When Chief Justice Zappala asked me to speak today, I once again felt very grateful to make a statement about my dear friend Nancy.

Nancy was the first and only female of the AOPC, and I was the first and so far only female elected Justice on our State Supreme Court, so to begin with we had a lot in common. I have never stopped being astonished at the wonderful job that Nancy did in representing our Court through difficult times.

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I read about her before I met her. Nancy is known for the computerization and automation of our courts, and the reality is she did far more in implementing computers, financial management, case management, et cetera. Nancy made it all happen, and I was fortunate enough to become dear friends with Nancy.

Nancy came to visit me soon after my election. She told me she was proud of me, and also told me not to ever be beaten down by the men who made us from their "ribs." I have always remembered Nancy's advice, although she was kidding, because we all know how respectful our fellow justices are. But we had some good laughs together.

Nancy was not a feminist, and she was treated with equality because that is what she deserved. I might add that many men were in awe of her.

We spoke woman-to-woman, and she taught me many of the ways of Court. We then went on to get to know each other's children from our conversations, and I kept telling Nancy, although she was teaching me so much, I was teaching her that she would never know happiness until she became a grandmother.

Well, Nancy had nothing to learn except that I was right about becoming a grandmother, and she told me that when the twins were born. Steven and Laura, although we never met until Nancy's memorial ceremony, I have felt for years as though I know you and your children.

Sas, as I told you before, there was never a time I spoke to your mother that you were not the subject of our conversation.

Rob, not to take anything away from you, she loved you very much. Unfortunately, I did not meet Rainey, Sas and Robert's daughter, until I went to see Nancy in the hospital on Halloween.

The first thing that Nancy did was take out all of the pictures of her grandchildren, but first introduced me to Rainey. And with all her illness and everything she was going

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through, that was all she could think of—her beautiful grandchildren.

Nancy went on to suffer an insurmountable illness, and she did that just like she did everything else, with dignity, with grace and with strength. And never with a complaint.

Again, and please tell your dad for me, Sas, Robert, Stephen and Laura, you are all lucky to have had a wife and mother like Nancy.

I tell you once again, we know the loss you have suffered, but there is much we can learn from the life of Nancy Sobolevitch.

She was brave beyond belief, and to many of us she'll be a role model as a great leader. Nancy's work in the Pennsylvania Courts is left for generations to come.

I had the opportunity to hear Nancy's friends speak at her memorial service, which was like a Quaker meeting. Her in-law, who was the minister, said beautiful words. And I think, Laura, your words were probably the most touching to me, because when a daughter-in-law gets up and talks like Nancy was your mother, I was truly moved by what you said.

All her friends were there from Penn, and they were there from all over the United States. They had one common thread, Nancy was a great woman and a dear friend.

Thank you, Chief Justice Zappala, for asking me to speak about our great leader Nancy Sobolevitch.

CHIEF JUSTICE ZAPPALA: Thank you, Justice Newman.

I would like to call our current Court Administrator, Zygmunt Pines, please.

MR. PINES: Mr. Chief Justice, Honorable Justices of the Court, family, friends and colleagues of Nancy Sobolevitch, the passing of a loved one is always a difficult experience. There is a poignant line in one of Alfred Lord Tennyson's poems in which he says: He put our lives so far apart that we cannot hear each other speak.

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I'm sure many of us have felt that somehow it would be more gratifying to honor those we love and respect when they are with us, rather than after they have gone.

But I'm quite certain that if we had had the opportunity to do so in Nancy's case, she would have given us that raised eyebrow of hers, that raised eyebrow of skepticism that many of us remember.

Nancy came to our judicial community in 1986 when this Court bestowed on her the honor of being the Court Administrator of Pennsylvania, a constitutional office which she exercised with skill, tact and charm for 14 years.

As we all know, and as Justice Newman pointed out, Nancy had the distinction of being the first woman and first non lawyer to occupy that commanding position of public service. When Nancy came to us after having served her sister branches of government, she had no road map to guide her. Her tenure was one of significant accomplishments and challenges. As soon as she arrived, she was faced with a crisis involving her own constituents in the so-called roofers scandal.

Later on, she would be confronted with another dramatic episode, the first impeachment of a jurist in over one hundred years. She saw us through those difficult days and she guided us well.

Through the years she transferred challenges into accomplishments. On her watch, a technology superhighway was built, linking 550 district justices offices through the Commonwealth.

As Chief Justice Zappala probably knows better than anyone in this courtroom, this was a task of incredible scope and complexity. And it was the basis for future technological advances. The goal was achieved and then became a national success story. All the more so because, as Nancy would point out proudly, it was done on time and within budget.

If Chief Justice Zappala and this Court where the creative producers of that project, Nancy was its able director.

Other achievements underscore her lasting legacy. Through her years of struggle and endurance, this Court's

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administrative arm, the AOPC, developed into a sophisticated network of administrative units to assist this Court in its difficult constitutional responsibility of supervision. During the twilight years of tenure, this Court also proceeded with the implementation of the first phase of statewide funding for the courts in order to more fully realize the institutional mandate of a unified judicial system.

Justice Cappy, I'm sure, can attest to the complexity of the challenge with which he was faced. And as I witnessed so well during the almost ten years that I worked closely with Nancy, the AOPC was able to consistently provide administrative advice and assistance to our judicial districts during periods of fiscal or administrative difficulties.

If we look back on such accomplishments, we can appreciate the qualities of character that made them possible. In preparation of our gathering today, I would ask some of Nancy's closest colleagues to identify the qualities they admire in her.

If they could offer their voices to you today, they would tell you about Nancy's honesty, compassion, intellectual nimbleness, her generosity, sense of humor, ability to listen and, by example, her ability to teach others.

To those qualities I, myself, would add unselfish devotion and unswerving loyalty.

Nancy was always, always motivated by her sense of duty to the people she served. Her desires and interests were always subordinate to our greater good and our welfare. Last, but not least, Nancy demonstrated an uncanny wisdom and practicality that always amazed me.

For example, I recall some years ago when it was announced that the jury had reached a verdict in the O.J. Simpson murder trial. "Talking head" attorneys and pundits were in sophisticated agreement as to the jury's extremely brief deliberations.

Nancy told me the morning of the announcement that her guess was that they would reach a not guilty verdict. Nancy was absolutely correct.

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When I later asked her how she had reached that conclusion, she simply said that she couldn't imagine how a jury would drink champagne at dinner the night before, and later convict someone of murder. How profoundly simple, and so Nancy.

Another illustration of Nancy's wisdom is something I carry with me to this day. When I came on board the AOPC 12 years ago as chief counsel, Nancy sat me down and explained the AOPC's special relationship to this honorable Court.

She told me never to lose sight of a basic principal. She said, and I quote, you are paid to give advice, not for them to take it.

When my assistant and I last saw Nancy the night before Thanksgiving at the convalescent facility near her home, we were overjoyed that she looked so well and had come through the ordeal of dual transplant at a hospital that was near the tragic events of 9/11. I can recall how she told us with wide-eyed wonder about Justice Newman's visit when she brought, I think, a corned beef and rye sandwich and a large shake.

I couldn't quite tell, however, by Nancy's expression whether her look was one of amazement in that, I can't believe I ate the whole thing or, I can't believe she really brought this to me.

Alas, our moments of optimism and joy were short-lived. This ceremonial epilogue to the life of a grand lady, who was a dedicated public servant, is indeed a singular honor. To be remembered and eulogized by the first elected female Supreme Court Justice, and also by a revered and respected former Third Circuit Judge is indeed a stunning tribute.

As we journey through a new century and millennium, Nancy's passing reminds us of the importance of a single person in our lives, as well as the preciousness and fragility of life and good health. There is always a strange stillness after the loss of a loved one, but in the stillness we can remember the days of sweet companionship.

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Nancy may not be able to hear us today, and if she does I'm sure her eyebrow is raised high to the heavens. But whether she hears us or not, the present and future members of her beautiful family—which I submit is in fact her greatest legacy—this family in future generations will be able to read the record of today's proceedings and appreciate the character and contribution of this great public servant, Nancy Sobolevitch.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share these thoughts.

CHIEF JUSTICE ZAPPALA: Thank you, Mr. Pines.

On behalf of the family, I understand that Sas is here.

Sas, please? Sas Becker.

SAS BECKER: Good morning Chief Justice Zappala and the honorable members of the Court. On behalf of the Sobolevitch family, I would like to thank you for giving us the opportunity for remembering Nancy here today.

I would now read something written by my father, Robert Sobolevitch:

Nancy passed away the day after Christmas a little over three months ago. We had been married for over 40 years, and we first met when we were both students at the University of Pennsylvania in September 1957. It is still, therefore, very difficult for me to speak of her in the past tense. To me she remains very much alive.

Most of you in the room knew her professionally in her position as the Court Administrator of Pennsylvania. Some may have known her in prior positions with the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth, or perhaps earlier in her positions in and around state government.

As many of you probably know, we had a large memorial for her in January. Most of the family came to some closure at the service, so today I thought I would share with you some thoughts about her experiences during the 14 years she was with the Court.

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Before I do that, however, on behalf of the family I would like to thank the members of the Court, their staff and all the staff at the AOPC for the support you showed her during her tenure.

As it became obvious that Nancy's illness was very serious, and throughout the long, hard fight that followed, your support has been stupendous and we thank you for it.

Nancy loved this Court and the entire system, although there were times when publicly that caused her some grief. But when she first took the job, I really didn't have a good idea of what it was all about. I recall an incident that occurred shortly after she started that gave me an idea.

Professionally at that time I had been working in the juvenile court system with juvenile court judges for over 20 years. One year I had a meeting with a former administrative judge of the Philadelphia Family Court. The general consensus was that this was one of the nicest men you could ever want to meet. He was held in extreme respect by all of us in juvenile justice.

In any case, after our meeting was over, I mentioned I was going over to Nancy's office and had never been there before, did he know exactly where it was. He looked at me and immediately suggested that we walk over together, and in exchange for showing me where her office was could I introduce him to her. I should have known at that time that she was getting into something different.

At about the same time that Nancy took the position, we moved into a home in Berwyn, a nice suburban community with lots of trees. We acquired several new sets of neighbors we had never met before. As is typical in such communities, the old timers on the block try to find out about the newcomers. Later, after we knew them better, they said that in the case of Nancy, this was made quite easy. They said that they never before had a neighbor whose various job issues were written about in the Sunday Inquirer by investigative reporters. This was also a clue as to what was to come.

Over the ensuing 13 years, things kept happening, but the high, or low point, if you will, occurred with the impeachment

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of one of the justices. Her greatest concern through the entire process was to present as professional a face as possible for the Court to the community. But I must tell you that the day we had to meet the impeached Justice to officially notify him that he had to vacate his office, while at the same time dismissing his staff and reclaiming state property, was perhaps the most difficult of her professional career.

There were other times that were just funny. Once, when we were applying for a refinance on our home to take advantage of falling interest rates, as part of the credit information Nancy was asked if she was a named party to any lawsuit. At the time the count was about 350. The look on the clerk's face was classic, until we explained they were not personal.

Nancy was also told by many she should write a book about her experiences on the job. She agreed it would be most interesting, but where could she live after that? Well, I won't write this book either but, Nancy, thanks for the memories, and thanks to the Court for affording her the opportunity to have a professional life that was anything but dull.

Thank you.

CHIEF JUSTICE ZAPPALA: Sas, please introduce the rest of your family present here today.

SAS BECKER: Yes, my brother Steven, my sister-in-law Laura, and my dear husband, Robert Becker.

CHIEF JUSTICE ZAPPALA: Let the record show that present at today's ceremony also is Attorney William Lamb, who had assisted the Supreme Court and Nancy in several tedious legal issues.

Any other members?

Let me conclude today's ceremony by simply recalling the wisdom of former Chief Justice Robert Nix.

When Bob had been given the task of trying to resolve the issue of a replacement of our former Court Administrator, who also was a jurist, it was somewhat daunting because he wanted to, I think, reach out into an altogether different area.

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The Court's relationship with the other branches of government was somewhat tenuous, and we needed somebody who we thought could solidify the relationship between the branches, they being equal. And he brought in and put on board for our Court system this woman by the name of Nancy Sobolevitch. Nancy was a non-lawyer, non-judge, and did not have the slightest clue what the judicial branch was all about, except to say they were a bunch of prima donnas.

Nancy, if I remember, had a staff maybe numbering between 30 to 50 at the most. In her tenure, Nancy operated this Court system during the good times and the bad times. The system developed to a point that I think we have in excess of 200 some employees. We now have one of the most skilled and dedicated group of employees in this country, thanks to her and our current Court Administrator.

In my humble opinion, and I will make sure this is said again at the Chief Justices' conference, this is possibly one of the finest Court Administrative offices in the country. And I thank Nancy for that foundation.

There have been terms used, and I think I would like to apply a few. Nancy was dedicated. She was loyal, extremely resilient. She was respectful. But she also was an achiever. There was never a task which was too small, nor a task which was too large, that Nancy could not handle with the best of them.

You must remember that when she came on board, she had to deal with seven prima donnas and babysitting a thousand judges—and still be able to manage and operate that group of people. You had to have the patience of Job and the wisdom of Solomon.

I think she gave to our Court system this sense that it does have the patience of Job and the wisdom of Solomon. I think she has laid the foundation now, as I say, of being one of the finest Court systems in the country.

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I thank the Sobolevitch family. You had a wonderful mother, you had a wonderful grandmother, but more importantly we had a tremendous state employee.

Thank you.

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