

Bertram L.J. Potter 1917-2008

Lawyer Fought for Disability Benefits

By Sara Randazzo
Daily Journal Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES — Bertram L.J. Potter, a Pasadena attorney who became a champion of the disabled by helping thousands of people obtain benefits from businesses and public agencies, has died at age 91. Sharp until the very end, Potter practiced law until weeks before his death on Nov. 21, when a heart attack rendered him unable to continue working.

Potter had a penchant for representing the underdog, and over the decades shaped his work at Potter, Cohen & Samulon — a firm he founded in 1960 — to focus exclusively on helping disabled clients, particularly in cases of Social Security disability law, attorneys who knew Potter said.

"He made himself an expert in what was an arcane area of law — Social Security — which is not an area where you conquer dragons and become a big hero," said Terence Bennett, a Pasadena lawyer who first met Potter in the early '70s. "Knowing he'd get no attention and very little money, he stayed in the trenches and was an unsung hero to thousands of people."

"He did probably more appellate work for Social Security cases than anybody else in Los Angeles," said attorney Jerry Persky, chair of the Social Security section of the Los Angeles County Bar Association. "He was the shining light in Los Angeles, and our mentor in terms of fighting the good fight for our clients."



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Bertram was born in New York City in 1917 and received his undergraduate degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1937. A 1940 graduate of Columbia Law School, Bertram took a break from law to serve as a soldier and officer in World War II, and was admitted to the California bar in 1959.

"He was never happier than pursuing a claim for a downtrodden person against a government entity," Thelma Cohen, a partner at Potter, Cohen & Samulon who joined the firm in 1976, said. "He never said no to anybody and was oftentimes a lawyer of lost causes."

Potter took particular interest in clients whose disabilities "escaped easy definition," his son and partner Peter Potter said, including those with fibromyalgia or chronic immune

deficiency syndrome.

Colleagues remember him as a selfless and genial man who always had time for other people.

"I never saw him in a bad mood," Cohen said. "And his clients loved him — we were always getting pecan pies and bottles of whisky sent to the office."

As a practitioner of law for four decades, Potter never let go of his old-school sensibility, writing briefs in longhand on legal pads, Cohen said.

"We tried to push him into a computer, but it never took," she said.

Outside of law, Potter was a devoted seaman who captained his 32-foot sailboat into his 80s. He also loved literature and was known to recite poetry by Homer and Shakespeare around the office.

Law was his profession, but understanding people was his passion, Paul Potter said.

"When I started practicing, he pulled me aside and said, 'Son, don't focus on the law because they're going to change it every six months,'" Paul Potter said. "Read poetry, read novels, and try to figure out something about the human condition."

Potter is survived by his wife of 63 years, Vilma Potter; his sons and law partners, Paul and Joshua Potter; his daughter Alexandra Potter-Watts; seven grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

A memorial is being planned for after the New Year.

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