

Titan of bankruptcy law was also a force on the tennis court

By Gina Kim
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LOS ANGELES — George M. Treister, who helped found the bankruptcy boutique Stutman, Treister & Glatt LLP and was a force to be reckoned with in the legal courts as well as on the tennis courts, died Tuesday. He was 95.

Treister was born Sept. 5, 1923 in Oxnard. He graduated from Los Angeles High School in 1940 before enrolling in UCLA. He graduated in three years and was drafted into the U.S. Navy, where he served from 1943 to 1946. He met his wife, Jane, in 1938. They married in 1947 and had four children: Laura, Neil, Adam and Dana. The youngest, son Dana, followed his father's footsteps into law.

"My father has a really interesting story," Dana Treister said. "As a Jewish man in the 50s, he couldn't get a job at a lot of big firms, so he was sort of backed into his practice that later became his only practice, and he influenced the bankruptcy world in so many ways."

After leaving the Navy, Treister enrolled in Yale Law School and graduated at the top of his class, according to Dana, then clerked for Phil S. Gibson, the chief justice of California, from 1949 to 1950. Treister clerked for U.S. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black from 1950 to 1951.

He then began working as an assistant U.S. attorney in the Central District of California, but was laid off in 1953 during President Dwight D. Eisenhower's administration.

Treister met bankruptcy lawyer Jack Stutman and began practicing at his firm, which became a preeminent bankruptcy boutique and remained so for five decades before closing in 2014.

Treister and his wife moved to Ashland, Oregon in 1994, where he remained until his death. Jane died in 1999 at the age of 73. Treister died on what would have been Jane's 99th birthday.

Treister taught bankruptcy law at USC Gould School of Law for 39 years from 1958



TREISTER

to 1997 and at Stanford Law School from 1976 to 1981. He also taught national programs for practitioners and bankruptcy judges for more than 30 years. He officially retired from practicing law in 1998 but consulted with the Stutman firm for another decade.

"What was inspiring about him was that nobody ever doubted his intellect, love and commitment to the practice," Dana Treister said. "He also loved teaching it."

The senior Treister also taught attorneys at competing firms, including Robert White, who founded the reorganization and restructuring practice at O'Melveny & Myers LLP.

"He didn't get paid; he did it out of love for sharing knowledge," Dana Treister said. "He talked to different lawyers about the bankruptcy practice all the time, and he certainly didn't foresee it, but these firms [where he taught] later became prominent and full service, whereas his firm was only a bankruptcy firm. He had such an influence on so many lawyers who went on to do successful things with their careers."

During the Great Depression, Treister saw firsthand how people suffered financially, "and it was something that never left him," which sparked his passion for bankruptcy law, according to Dana.

"His whole life he wanted to help people in financial distress," Dana said. "And he always enjoyed that and never practiced anything else."

When he wasn't working, Treister spent much of his time at tennis courts in Los Angeles. He was a top-ranked player for UCLA in the 1940s.

"George could've been a world-class tennis player had he pursued [tennis] instead of becoming a lawyer," said J. Ronald Trost, a partner of Treister's at Stutman from 1961 to 1971, a period Trost called "the formative years of bankruptcy code reform."

Trost went on to become managing partner at Sidley & Austin LLP in Los Angeles from 1980 to 2002. But even after Trost left Stutman, he and Treister remained friends.

"Working with George was like working with a master. He wasn't really about the complex practice of law, the tension of litigation. He more so liked the theory of it and the academic side of the practice," Trost recalled. "Bankruptcy law is very complex and code-driven, but he was on top of the issues. George understood bankruptcy at a level like a Harvard Law professor."

Trost added: "I'll miss George, his friendship, brilliant mind and demeanor. Even though the last time I saw him was 15 years ago, I called him on his birthday every year. We'd talk for half an hour. It was like we were never apart. I haven't missed a birthday call in 60 years."

Although he won't be able to carry out this longtime tradition anymore, Trost says he will forever commemorate his friend and longtime colleague, who was also a fan of Tanqueray gin, something Treister would enjoy with his partners on Friday nights after closing up shop for the weekend.

"At Stutman on Friday nights, we'd open the bar, and George would always have a Tanqueray martini on the rocks," Trost reminisced. "Later, I kept a bottle of it in my house ever since because it reminds me of him, so tonight I'm going to open it up and have a Tanqueray martini on the rocks, in honor of George."

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