

# Superior Court judge's death shocks locals

✓ <sup>Bio-D</sup> Colleagues remember Arthur Danner III as one of Santa Cruz County's best district attorneys <sup>RP 1-30-06</sup>

By AMANDA SCHOENBERG  
OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

Santa Cruz County Superior Court Judge Arthur Danner III, called "the greatest district attorney in the county," died Saturday morning of a heart attack at the age of 62, after a jog on vacation in Palm Springs.

Colleagues remembered Danner as a fair judge and a former district attorney, who tried some of the county's most challenging serial murder cases in 20 years in the position.

District Attorney Bob Lee heard the news Saturday morning after coming home from an early morning murder case in Watsonville. Still shaken, Lee said Danner's loss was a devastating one.

"I lost a friend," Lee said. "I owe a lot of my career to Art Danner. It's not just a loss to the legal community here, but the whole state of California. He was probably the greatest DA Santa Cruz County ever had."

Danner grew up in Brooklyn, N.Y., and later moved to Illinois

with his father, Art Danner Jr., mother Grace and sisters Lynne and Sheril. Danner earned his bachelor's and law degrees from the University of Illinois and was admitted to the California State Bar in 1969. He had recently purchased a home in La Selva Beach



Danner

with his wife Betty, his father said.

Art Danner Jr. described his son as a leader who worked hard for his community and excelled at everything he did, from the Eagle Scouts to county judge.

"He's been a leader in everything he's ever done," his father said. "Even as a kid. He just did it all."

Former Watsonville Police Chief Ray Belgard was chief administrator at the district attorney's office when District Attorney Paul Chang hired Danner as an as-

sistant district attorney in 1969.

Belgard and Danner began a strong friendship, as Belgard watched Danner work his way up in the district attorney's office. He remembered Danner's increasing prominence as the office faced a string of serial murders in the 1970s. Danner contributed invaluable research in the case of Herbert Mullin, who was sentenced to life in prison after admitting to killing 13 people, Belgard said.

# DANNER

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Danner was elected district attorney in 1978 and became better known during the so-called Trailside Killer case, when six women and one man were killed in a string of murders in 1980. Danner scored a guilty verdict in the case in 1984.

Danner, known as "the bulldog" for his persistent prosecution style, served as president and a board member of the California District Attorney Association and was recognized by the state legislature for his work with Future Families and the Women's Crisis Support and Shelter Project.

As his fame grew, Danner served as an expert commentator during the trial of O.J. Simpson and was invited to meet former President Bill Clinton at the Rose Garden, his father said.

He was nominated by Republican Gov. Pete Wilson for a Superior Court judge post in 1998, where he worked primarily on criminal cases until he switched to a civil court assignment in January 2005.

Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina broke the news of Danner's death to Watsonville locals at the Pajaro Chamber of Commerce annual dinner and auction Saturday night, eliciting an audible gasp from the crowd.

Medina had worked closely with Danner when he was a young lawyer and Medina was a detective. He described Danner as "the fullback," never a flashy prosecutor, but a winning attorney who "always brought the jury right to that point" and won the case.

Medina remembered playing football with Danner, and recounted the good-natured 100-yard dash the two raced behind the Santa Cruz County Courthouse. They each won once, Medina said.

"He was a good guy, really down to earth," he said. "Everybody around the courtroom really appreciated him."

Danner also started coaching Lee's Pop Warner football team in 1971 soon after he arrived. He was always up for anything, Lee said.

"If you played mud football, Art would be there," he said.

Tom Griffin, an attorney with Watsonville-based Grunsky Law Firm, called Danner "a fantastic example of judicial temperament." Griffin, who worked with Danner on a case just two weeks before his death, said Danner seemed healthy and fit, a man at the peak of his career.

As comfortable as he seemed to be in the fast-paced life of a district attorney, Griffin said Danner was an even better match for the judge position.

"His personality was really well-suited to be a judge, you felt at ease and I never saw him lose his temper," Griffin said. "He really came across as the everyman in the courtroom."

Danner's death rocks an already unsettled Superior Court, which is still recovering from the death of judge Kathleen Akao on Nov. 27, as well as the deaths of retired judge Charles "Chick" Franich and Judge Samuel Stevens' son this month. Judge Thomas Kelly is also planning to retire, leaving three vacant positions, according to Santa Cruz County assistant executive officer Roy Blaine.

Possible replacements may include Scotts Valley City Council member and deputy district attorney Paul Marigonda, private attorney Paul Burdick and Santa Cruz County Court Commissioner Irwin Joseph, Blaine said.

Memorial plans had not yet been announced.