

OBITUARY

Federal Judge Bruce Selya, widely respected R.I. jurist known for his vocabulary, dies at 90

US Senator Jack Reed described the judge as “a legal legend” and “a man of great wisdom, integrity, modesty, wit, and high ethical standards”

By [Edward Fitzpatrick](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 23, 2025, 11:31 a.m.



Judge Selya, a Providence native and resident, was described by US Senator Jack Reed as “a man of great wisdom, integrity, modesty, wit, and high ethical standards.” HANDOUT

PROVIDENCE — Bruce M. Selya, a federal judge from Rhode Island whose vast vocabulary and widely cited opinions inspired generations of lawyers including [a current Supreme Court justice](#), died Saturday at Miriam Hospital in Providence. He was 90.

Judge Selya, a Providence native and resident, became the first Jewish person to ascend to the federal bench in Rhode Island, serving as a senior judge on the Boston-based [First US Circuit Court of Appeals](#) and as chief judge of the [US Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court of Review](#).

“Rhode Island has lost a legal legend whose outstanding contributions to the community and the people of Rhode Island go well beyond his four decades of remarkable service on the federal bench,” US Senator Jack Reed said in a statement Sunday.

Reed described Judge Selya as “a man of great wisdom, integrity, modesty, wit, and high ethical standards.”

Senator Jack Reed  

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“As a judge, Bruce Selya was nationally renowned and respected and set a high bar that many others in his profession admire and aspire to reach,” Reed said. “As a man, he will be remembered for his exemplary devotion to the law and uplifting others, particularly those in his beloved hometown of Providence.”

In her new memoir, US Supreme Court Justice [Ketanji Brown Jackson](#) wrote about how much she learned — including a slew of new vocabulary words — while clerking for Judge Selya from 1997 to 1998.

“A bespectacled man then in his mid-60s with graying swept-back hair, he had an old-world courtliness about him, and an erudite way of expressing himself that extended to his decisions,” she wrote.

Judge Selya — once dubbed the “[sesquipedalian septuagenarian](#)” by The Boston Globe — has cited two reasons for his extensive vocabulary: He’s always been a voracious reader, he said, and he took four years of Latin at Classical High School in Providence, sparking his interest in the origins of words.

Jackson recalled that Judge Selya would insert “arcane terms” into draft opinions, sending her and other clerks “scurrying for Old English dictionaries.” She recalled learning words such as asseverate (to declare or affirm a thing), gallimaufry (a confusing hodgepodge of elements, legal or otherwise), and velivolant (being in full sail). She also recalled the judge pausing to consider whether to insert a comma in an opinion.

“He prided himself on opinions that would be flawless in their grammar, reasoning, distinctive use of language, and presentation,” Jackson wrote, calling Judge Selya “brilliant, meticulous, and scholarly.”

She said she emerged from the clerkship not only with an expanded vocabulary but with a higher “level of fastidiousness in drafting opinions.”

Judge Selya, who [called President Biden's choice](#) of Jackson a “terrific” appointment, told the Globe that Jackson sent him an advance copy of her book along with a handwritten note, and while he declined to reveal the contents of the note, he said, “I can say it’s one of the very few things that, at my advanced age, reduced me to tears.”

Professor Michael J. Yelnosky, former dean of the Roger Williams University School of Law, described Judge Selya as “a Rhode Island institution.”

“Just a giant,” Yelnosky said. “I think it’s fair to call him the greatest jurist in Rhode Island history. He had a real national reputation. This is not just a Rhode Island guy.”

He said Judge Selya was well-respected by his colleagues on the First US Circuit Court of Appeals and had friends on the US Supreme Court.

“He was well-regarded both for the intellectual quality of his work and his rhetorical flourishes,” Yelnosky said. “And just as gracious and generous as a human being could be.”



In 2018, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg took part in a fireside chat with Judge Selya at the Roger Williams University School of Law in Rhode Island. JAMES JONES/ROGER WILLIAMS UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW

In a statement Sunday, [Judge O. Rogeriee Thompson](#), a Providence resident who succeeded Judge Selya on the First Circuit court after he assumed senior status, called him “a brilliant colleague whose influence on American jurisprudence cannot be underestimated.”

“I was proud and honored to be the successor to his seat on the court, but I quivered, knowing that I was following in the footsteps of a legal giant,” Thompson said. “I will be forever grateful for all the knowledge and wisdom Judge Selya was gracious enough to share with me in his sincere desire to help me flourish in his wake.”

First Circuit Chief Judge David J. Barron said in a statement: “Bruce Selya’s legacy will live on in his much-quoted opinions, which have shaped the law of our circuit in nearly every field. But it will also live on in the high standard that he set for appellate judging nationwide. His devotion to the job was unmatched, and his love for it an inspiration.”

Leslie Y. Gutterman, rabbi emeritus at Temple Beth-El in Providence, said, “He was giant in his influence — not only in the judicial realm, where he may have been one of the most quoted judges in the country — but also in his effect on Rhode Island institutions. He was Providence born and bred and loved this city.”

Born in Providence in May 1934, Judge Selya received an undergraduate degree from Harvard University in 1955 and a law degree from Harvard Law School in 1958. He served as law clerk to Judge Edward W. Day of the US District Court for Rhode Island from 1958 to 1960. He worked in private practice in Providence from 1960 to 1982 and served as a judge on the Lincoln Probate Court from 1965 to 1972.

In 1982, he was nominated to US District Court by President Ronald Reagan and he was elevated to the First US Circuit Court of Appeals in 1986. In 2008, he became the longest-serving Rhode Islander in the history of the First Circuit court.

In 2000, Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist appointed Judge Selya to the Judicial Panel on Multidistrict Litigation. In 2005, Supreme Court Chief Justice John

Roberts appointed Judge Selya to the US Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court of Review, and in 2008 he became chief judge of the Court of Review. Judge Selya received senior status on the First Circuit at the end of 2006.

Judge Selya contributed his time for many community causes. He was a member of the board of trustees of Rhode Island Hospital and founding chairman of the board of Lifespan, Rhode Island's first health system. He was also a chairman of the board of trustees of Bryant University and the board of directors of Roger Williams University School of Law.

In 2017, Roger Williams Law dedicated the [Honorable Bruce M. Selya Appellate Courtroom](#), naming one of the law school's most impressive spaces in honor of one of Rhode Island's most well-respected judges. In 2023, the City of Providence designated Fulton Street as Judge Selya Way.

Judge Selya leaves his wife, Cindy, their two daughters, Loriann Young of Dedham and Dawn Meredith Selya of Boston, and six grandchildren.

A funeral service is scheduled for 11 a.m. March 3 at Temple Beth-El in Providence.

This article has been updated with statement from judges on the First Circuit court.

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