



Lawyers, judges recall Egbert as one of generation's best criminal defense lawyers

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Members of the bar continued to express shock and sadness last week over the sudden death of legendary Boston attorney Richard M. Egbert.

"He was one of the very best trial lawyers I ever saw," said U.S. District Court Judge Joseph L. Tauro. "When you had an Egbert trial, I'd always say that you [should] pay to get in. It was always good theater, and you knew it was going to be a well-trying, tough case."

Egbert, 61, who handled some of the most notorious cases of the past three decades, including those of former Superior Court Judge Maria I. Lopez, ex-House Speaker Thomas M. Finneran and former Providence Mayor Vincent "Buddy" Cianci Jr., collapsed on July 24 in New York state while at dinner with his wife, Boston attorney Shannon A. McAuliffe.

Superior Court Judge Margaret R. Hinkle called Egbert "a giant in the legal community. In my opinion, [he was] one of the best cross-examiners I have observed either as an attorney or as a judge."

U.S. District Court Judge William G. Young added that Egbert's complete mastery of the record and knack for courtroom dramatics set him apart.

"He's got to be considered one of the finest criminal defense lawyers of our generation," he said.

Young said Egbert, a 1972 Northeastern University School of Law graduate, tried at least five cases in front of him.

"One of his techniques was to bore in on a witness with a series of questions and answers," recalled Young. "As he would do so, he would physically approach the witness from across the courtroom, and then he would ask the capstone question."

At that point, Egbert would turn away from the witness, dismissively, before he or she had an opportunity

to answer, Young said.

"In full view of the jury, the witness either was going to give him the final point, or he was going to be dismissive of the fact that the witness simply wouldn't — given the structure of his examination — admit to the point that he was trying to make," said Young. "He did it better than anyone I've ever known."

While Egbert would plead out a defendant when he had an appropriate negotiation, Young said the lawyer never got involved in client cooperation with the government.

"As I recall, that was not something he participated in," said Young. "My recollection is that he would get some other lawyer to represent the client if the client was going to cooperate."

Former Bar Counsel Arnold R. Rosenfeld of K&L Gates in Boston, who tried cases against and alongside Egbert and spoke to him on a regular basis, said the news of his death came as a complete shock.

"I hate to have to use the past tense, but he *was* one of the best lawyers I ever met," said Rosenfeld, whose firm is steps away from Egbert's 99 Summer St. office. "He knew how to go for the throat on cross-examination. And he was respected by everyone, including prosecutors who absolutely feared him."

Paul F. Ware Jr., a lawyer at Boston's Goodwin Procter who prosecuted the Lopez case on behalf of the Commission on Judicial Conduct, described Egbert as the consummate trial lawyer.

"I knew Rich mostly by reputation prior to the Lopez case, but in that case we had substantial interaction for more than a year, and I admired his skills," he said. "He was a fierce adversary. I had many disagreements with him, but they were always professional and not personal."

Ware agreed that Egbert's cross-examination, particularly of the Suffolk County DA witnesses in the Lopez case, was masterful.

"He could cross-examine more with less than virtually any trial lawyer in the city," said Ware. "He was always animated and tough, and I think his cross-examination in that case exemplified those traits."

Assistant Clerk-Magistrate Paula A. Sordillo described Egbert as combative, recalling that his commanding voice often rose to a shouting level during dramatic portions of his cross-examination.

"We had a case where his client was charged with a beating in North Station," she said. "It was not a nice case, and his client was one of the most culpable. He turned the whole case around by cross-examining these witnesses that were on the street. He was amazing."

In 1999, Egbert served as president of the Massachusetts Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers.

"He was the go-to-go guy for a lot of individuals who found themselves in need of tough counsel that was willing to try a case all the way to the bitter end," said Suffolk County District Attorney Daniel F. Conley, who knew Egbert since the mid-1980s. "I know that prosecutors throughout Massachusetts had a high level of respect for Richie. He had a fiery type of personality and was a tough adversary. It's a great loss."

His longtime friend and office partner, Bernard M. Grossberg, said Egbert, a father of three and grandfather of three, appeared to be in good health and was not suffering from any significant medical conditions.

"He was taking care of himself, working out every day," he said. "I don't have the words to describe how devastating this is."

