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In Memoriam

Marla Graff Decker
Court of Appeals of Virginia

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IN MEMORIAM

THE HONORABLE WALTER S. FELTON, JR.

*Marla Graff Decker **

The career of Judge Walter S. Felton, Jr., is marked indelibly with the theme of “called to service.” First, as a Captain in the United States Army, representing wounded soldiers returning home from Vietnam. Second, as counsel to one of Virginia’s Governors, which included playing a pivotal role in leading the Commonwealth through the unprecedented national tragedy of September 11, 2001, and its aftermath. Third, as a judge and then chief judge of the Court of Appeals of Virginia. These three stages of his career highlight Judge Felton’s commitment to public service and his value to his beloved Commonwealth.

In his personal life, Walter Felton was a devoted husband, father, grandfather, and friend. In addition to those most important roles, in his professional life, he will be remembered as a statesman, public servant, leader, policy advisor, mentor, legal scholar, professor, and cherished colleague. Judge Felton served in many roles throughout his long and distinguished career, and he touched many lives both personally and professionally. He leaves a notable legacy, and those he trained and mentored will continue to benefit from the wisdom he shared.

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Judge Felton was truly a son of the Commonwealth as well as a proud graduate of the University of Richmond. His resume is a distinguished one, but, first and foremost, the way people will remember this Virginia icon is best demonstrated by the way colleagues and friends spoke about him at the time of his retirement from the Court of Appeals of Virginia. Judge Felton was described as humble, kind, ethical, compassionate, professional, and hard-working. His soft-spoken ways, warm smile, and infectious laugh were a hallmark of his demeanor on the bench and off. He always made people feel respected and comfortable in his presence. In his role as a judge, he treated everyone equally with dignity and compassion, and he paid close attention to every litigant who appeared before him. This was Judge Walter S. Felton, Jr.

Judge Felton was born in 1944 in Suffolk, Virginia. He received his undergraduate degree from the University of Richmond in 1966 and his law degree from the University in 1969. He began his legal career as a Captain in the United States Army Judge Advocate General's Corps and proudly served his country until 1973. After a short time in private practice, Felton became a professor at the Marshall-Wythe School of Law at the College of William & Mary and the administrator of the Commonwealth's Attorneys Services Council, where he spearheaded training for prosecutors. In 1994, Attorney General James S. Gilmore, III appointed Felton Deputy Attorney General, then Senior Counsel. Four years later, Felton was appointed Counselor and Directory of Policy for then-Governor Gilmore. After serving in that administration, Felton became Legislative Counsel for the College of William & Mary.

Walter Felton was passionate about serving his country and the Commonwealth and always spoke vividly about his many experiences. He had plenty of stories and the breadth and depth of his involvement in state government was remarkable. He loved teaching and mentoring students and new attorneys. Many individuals have Judge Felton to thank for their careers and important life decisions. This is one of the many ways Walter Felton made his mark in the Commonwealth. That did not change when he became a judge. He continued to teach, mentor, and counsel new and seasoned attorneys alike.

Judge Felton's career on the bench began in September 2002 after he was elected by the General Assembly to serve as a judge on the Court of Appeals of Virginia. By that stage of his career, Judge Felton was widely known and respected in the legal community,

and it came as no surprise to anyone that he was elected to that position. It also came as no surprise that soon thereafter the judges of the Court elected Felton to serve as the chief judge, a position he held until his retirement in 2014. Judge Felton's commitment to the justice system is further reflected by the fact that even in retirement, he agreed to serve as a senior judge on the Court.

Judge Felton was a leader, respected by the judiciary and the legal community as a whole. This systemwide admiration was demonstrated in a significant way in 2013 when he was selected as the recipient of the prestigious Harry L. Carrico Outstanding Career Service Award. Suffice to say that through his more than forty-year career, Judge Felton's dedication to public service, the Rule of Law, and our Commonwealth can best be described as unwavering. The Outstanding Career Service Award recognizes that very fact. It is presented by the Judicial Council of Virginia to a judge who "over an extended career, demonstrates exceptional leadership in the administration of the courts while exhibiting the traits of integrity, courtesy, impartiality, wisdom and humility."¹ The Judicial Council, chaired by the Chief Justice, includes judges from Virginia courts of all levels, practicing attorneys, and state legislators. That Council's selection of then-Chief Judge Felton as the recipient of the award is just one of many accolades received throughout this humble Virginian's career.

Those who knew Judge Felton recognized that his soft-spoken way, intellect, and negotiation skills resulted in him leading the Commonwealth through many complex issues, matters, and decisions. This is true whether it was in his role as a deputy attorney general, counsel to the Governor, committee or commission member, professor, judge, or chief judge. He is remembered fondly as a person who truly made his mark in the world and made our Commonwealth a better place.

1. JUD. COUNCIL OF VA., 2014 REPORT TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY AND SUPREME COURT OF VIRGINIA 2-3 (published Mar. 2015).