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A TRIBUTE TO JUSTICE PETER S. POPOVICH

R. Scott Davies†

In March 1991, Justice Peter S. Popovich joined the law firm of Briggs and Morgan. He remained a valued member of the firm until his passing in 1996.

What can be said about such a man that has not already been written? He was blessed in his later years with the accolades he deserved for his leadership as chief judge of the Minnesota Court of Appeals and chief justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court. He was at all points a lawyer's lawyer with a reputation for decency and a hard work ethic. I write not to note those things, which are well-known, nor to underscore his acknowledged expertise in public finance, education, and municipal law, his superb skills as a mediator of disputes, nor to chronicle the excellent services that he rendered to clients of the firm. That would all be expected of a person of the character, integrity, and drive of Peter Popovich.

Instead, I wish to note for this record that the “Chief” — as he was referred to at the firm — was a warm, gregarious, and approachable person. Judge Popovich shared his considerable wisdom with many lawyers in the firm. In a time when law practice is earmarked by hurry and stress, when the efficiency of contact frequently precludes casual yet important conversations, Judge Popovich always kept the proper perspective. While handling matters of importance for clients of the firm, he always found time to spin a story with a secretary, a copy center operator, or any other member of the firm that was fortunate enough to have contact with him. He reminded us all of the need to remain cordial, indeed, collegial to each other, particularly when stress is the highest.

Judge Popovich was a mentor to many lawyers in the firm. Anyone with an appellate issue found a ready ear and sage advice. This writer can recall many occasions when the proper phrasing of an appellate issue, the proper approach to an appellate argument, or a simple point of strategy were highlighted and clarified by a

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conversation with Judge Popovich. For newer lawyers in the firm, he presented a rare opportunity to discuss a matter with someone who had “done it all.”

Not content with passing advice, Judge Popovich followed up on an inquiry to find out how the matter had gone, whether the argument had turned out the way we expected, and whether there was anything else that he could do to help. One came away from those conversations with a feeling that he had a genuine interest, not only in the question, but in you as a person, in your development as a lawyer.

Judge Popovich’s eyes would shine when a new matter was brought to his attention. He never lost his desire to solve a problem for a client, nor the energy to devote whatever time and effort it took to reach the solution. This firm has been blessed with a number of great lawyers who have contributed to its rich heritage. Judge Popovich was a major contributor.