

**Melton Cude**

Honorable, fair judge remembered

By [Kristen Tribe](#) | Published on December 02, 2020



Melton Cude *Messenger* photo by Joy Burgess-Carrico

The courthouse will be quiet in the absence of Judge Melton Cude.

The longtime county court-at-law judge, known for his infectious smile and chatty nature, died Sunday from complications due to COVID-19. He was diagnosed in mid-November and had been hospitalized about two weeks when he passed away.

County Attorney James Stainton said he and Cude shared a running joke about who was the chattiest between the two of them.

“He firmly believed I had eclipsed him. I believed the contrary,” Stainton said with a laugh. “But it had been acknowledged that if you put us both in a room, you were going to be there a while.”

Cude, one of Wise County’s longest serving county officials, was serving his ninth consecutive term in County Court-at-Law No. 1. Stainton said Cude’s communication skills were a key element of his courtroom proceedings.

“We’re often dealing with people who aren’t having their best day,” Stainton said, “but every time you would go in (Cude’s courtroom) he would be talking to the defendant. He talked to every one of them who was doing a plea, and he’d be the same way with everyone – happy.

“It wasn’t like they were talking to a judge. It was a normal, everyday guy giving someone information,” he said. “Those people weren’t happy about going on probation, but they left with a positive sense of the justice system because someone was willing to take the time with them to explain things.”

County Judge J.D. Clark said everyone, including defendants, attorneys and courthouse staff, was treated the same in Cude’s courtroom. Although he had held his office since 1987, he was not arrogant and did not equate tenure with power.

“He genuinely viewed himself as someone who was supposed to listen to everyone and make a judgment call,” Clark said. “I think he was a good symbol of how our justice system should be and what people want to see in our system.

“He had a good heart. Who better to be sitting on a bench and making judgments than a guy like that?”

Cude viewed the courthouse operations as a team effort, and although he didn’t necessarily give direct advice, he guided young attorneys and taught them by example about proper procedures and demeanor.

“When I got here in 2001 [as a practicing attorney], I had Cude and [District Judge John] Fostel. They were my two judges,” Stainton said. “For a young lawyer, you couldn’t ask for a better two judges to start your legal life.”

Stainton said their guidance has set the tone for his career.

“The way Judge Cude did things ... the way he was calm and fair about things. Hopefully I can teach those things to someone else,” he said.

Commissioners attorney Thomas Aaberg echoed Stainton’s sentiments.

“He was my first judge when I started working here. He’s always been very helpful and very fair, a great person to learn the law from,” Aaberg said. “He’s just one of the most knowledgeable people I’ve ever known, and not just about law ... war, planes, World War II ... everything. He either had read about it or knew about it personally. That wealth of knowledge will be missed.”

Clark said Cude was a treasured resource for courthouse history, and he regularly shared stories about things that happened in the courthouse or details he thought might be useful as plans are made for the building’s restoration.

“Just a few weeks ago, he stuck his head in my office to make sure we get the windows fixed right,” Clark said with a laugh.

Gerre Joiner, former music minister at the First Baptist Church of Decatur where Cude was a deacon, said the courthouse clock tower was one of the first things Cude showed him when he moved to town almost 20 years ago.

“That was his element,” Joiner said. “It was something he wanted to share and he was so proud of this county, its legacy and building a courthouse that would stand the test of time. He sure wanted me to know about that and climb those steps.”



JUDGING COOKIES – From left, County Court-at-Law Judge Melton Cude, District Judge John Fostel and County Judge J.D. Clark taste entries in the 2015 Christmas Cookie Challenge at the Wise County Courthouse. “We had the best time,” Clark said. “We would get way too deep in thought analyzing these cookies.” Cude died Sunday due to complications from COVID-19. Fostel died June 2, 2017. *Messenger* archive photo

Cude was a member of the FBC choir, and Joiner said he was always quick to volunteer, whether it was taking care of elderly church members or pulling out his trumpet in a moment’s notice for taps or a Christmas pick-up band.

“He was in the front of the line. He was the go-to,” Joiner said. “He was a very good natured man, and he would do whatever was needed. He wasn’t looking for notoriety or accolades.”

Cude’s commitment to community service was also exemplified through his work with the Decatur Rotary Club, where he was the longest-serving member. He joined in 1980, serving in numerous positions through the years including president and most recently, sergeant at arms.

“He was pretty much there anytime we had an event,” said fellow Rotarian John Lanier. “Anybody who needed him knew he was a man who wore many hats. He’d wear a Santa hat and play music or do a dance when we were ringing the Salvation Army bell. Any event, he’d have a hat that had something to do with that.

“And of course, he always had his Texas A&M hat close by, just in case.”

Lanier said Cude lived his life by the Rotarian Four Way Test:

“Of the things we think, say and do:

1. Is it the truth?
2. Is it fair to all concerned?
3. Will it build goodwill and better friendships?
4. Will it be beneficial to all concerned?”

“Everything he did passed all four of those tests,” Lanier said. “That’s how he lived his life. He used humor a lot to help people. You can tell people a story that will make them feel horrible about themselves, but sometimes through you humor, you can help them realize you’re trying to help them, not criticize them, even as a judge. It wasn’t about punishing them, but helping them as much as he could.

“He always encouraged learning, participation and being kind to each other.”

Judge Cude's funeral is 2 p.m. Friday at First Baptist Church in Decatur with burial at Oaklawn Cemetery. Hawkins Funeral Home in Decatur is handling arrangements.

Gov. Greg Abbott issued an order Monday, at the request of Clark, to lower the United States and Texas flags to half-staff in honor of the life and public service of Cude. Flags may be returned to full-staff Sunday.

"The First Lady and I extend our heartfelt condolences to the Cude family and to the Wise County staff and community for this loss," Abbott said in a letter announcing his order.

To read Cude's obituary, go to [wcmessenger.com/articles/melton-david-cude](http://wcmessenger.com/articles/melton-david-cude).