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Trailblazing Judge Paul Feinman Dead After Recent Retirement From Court of Appeals

Paul Feinman redefined what was possible for LGBTQ lawyers and judges in New York, said Matthew Skinner, executive director of The Richard C. Failla LGBTQ Commission, last week.

By Ryan Tarinelli | March 31, 2021



Former Judge Paul Feinman of the New York Court of Appeals/courtesy photo

Recently retired Court of Appeals Judge Paul Feinman, the first openly gay member of the state’s highest court, has died. He was 61.

The news comes just over a week after he abruptly retired from the state’s highest court “to attend to health concerns.”

DiFiore praised Feinman, who joined the court in 2017, as a champion of LGBTQ rights and as a trailblazing pioneer for LGBTQ lawyers and judges. She says a private funeral will be held for his friends and family.

“Even as his illness progressed, his productivity and the quality of his writings and contributions never suffered,” DiFiore said in a statement. “And no one could want for a warmer or more caring colleague than Paul Feinman.”

It was not immediately clear on Wednesday how Feinman died or what specifically prompted his resignation from the state’s top court. A spokesman for the Court of Appeals did not comment further when asked about Feinman’s health.

Before serving on the top court, Feinman was appointed to the Appellate Division, First Department in 2012 and had been elected to state Supreme Court in 2007.

A graduate of the law school at the University of Minnesota, Feinman worked as a staff attorney in the appeals bureau of the Legal Aid Society of Nassau County early in his career.

DiFiore described him as a kind man and a beloved colleague who left an extraordinary impact on New York law and the state’s highest court.

“Judge Feinman served with excellence at every level of our Judiciary, and his broad experience, knowledge and wisdom earned him the respect and warm personal regard of his judicial colleagues,” she said in the statement.

Last week, news of Feinman’s retirement prompted a wave of admiration from New York’s legal community.

Feinman redefined what was possible for LGBTQ lawyers and judges in New York, said Matthew Skinner, executive director of The Richard C. Failla LGBTQ Commission, last week.

“He just has a huge place in history,” he said last week.

Feinman’s elevation to the top court felt like a new chapter of hope, Skinner said, particularly because some past decisions from the court had a negative impact on the LGBTQ community.

Feinman was asked about his health in 2017 after being nominated for the court. At a committee meeting during his confirmation process, one state senator said the judge had been afflicted with leukemia in 2015 and asked about his health.

“I underwent chemotherapy and a stem cell transplant and I sit here with no leukemia,” he said, knocking his knuckles against the wood table.

He noted the doctors that treated him were world-renowned experts.

“They assure me that I am more than capable of fulfilling my responsibilities on the court,” he said at the time.

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