

William O. Dillingham 1951-2015

Entrepreneurial attorney admired for enthusiasm, advocacy

By Joshua Sebald
Daily Journal Staff Writer

William O. Dillingham, a co-founder of San Francisco boutique Dillingham & Murphy LLP best known for winning an early and influential gay rights case, died Monday following a battle with cancer. He was 64.

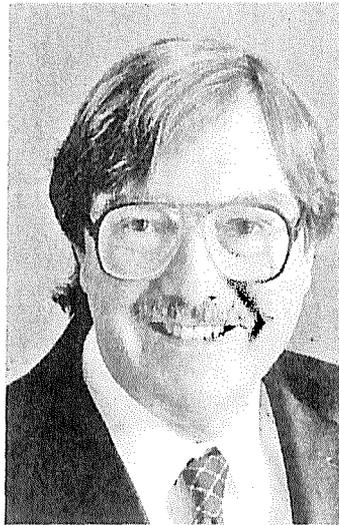
Dillingham was known for his creativity and gung ho attitude, particularly in taking on a pro bono gay rights case in 1982, long before it became an en vogue topic for attorneys.

He started out as a product liability attorney but gravitated into business and estate planning and away from litigation over time as he took on more entrepreneurial interests.

Dillingham worked with gay rights advocates to help Carl Hill visit the U.S. from London in 1982.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service initially denied Hill entry into the country because he was wearing a shirt that referenced homosexuality, citing a rarely used regulation that barred entry to homosexuals, describing them as psychologically "defective."

Dillingham argued that the INS needed a medical evaluation proving Hill was afflicted with a mental defect and couldn't just exclude him categorically, an argument that won the case and held up on appeal.



Thomas V. Loran III, a partner at Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP, successor to the firm where Dillingham began his career, said the case was indicative of the attorney's unique mix of creativity and efficiency.

"He was swimming against the tide, trying to set a new precedent in an area of the law that was very unexplored," said Loran. "The inequities of it spoke to his heart as well."

Dillingham was also particularly proud to survive a reorganization of the legal team at one of his largest product liability clients, E. I. du Pont de Nemours and Co., even though he didn't have a platform at a large law firm for most of his career.

The company culled many of its outside law firms and expanded its internal legal function significantly, leaving firms scrambling to maintain their relationship with the client.

"Through Bill's efforts, we were one of the firms that made the cut when DuPont's legal department went to a convergence model," Murphy said. "To be able to go in there with a lot of much larger firms and compete successfully for DuPont's business gave him a lot of pleasure and pride."

Murphy said he benefited from his partner's enthusiasm for entrepreneurship, which freed Murphy up to focus on his practice.

"Bill really lit up running a business. He loved doing that," Murphy said. "He practiced law but he also paid a lot of attention to the nuts and bolts."

Dillingham stayed close with friends from Pillsbury and hired some of them as well, such as John D. Dahlberg, Thomas J. Klitgaard and the late William A. Gaus.

But his friendships at the firm extended beyond the partnership.

"Bill also ran the rather infamous FOOLS POOL. The best college/pro football pool in Pillsbury history," wrote Bill Makinney, long-time head of the firm's calendar department. "We had a lot of laughs over the years."

joshua_sebald@dailyjournal.com