

## Biography celebrates life of North Dakota's longest serving Supreme Court Chief Justice

"Call Me Jerry" chronicles Jerry VandeWalle's remarkable life of service

By Michael Standaert/North Dakota News Cooperative

Kind. Dedicated. Humble. Non-partisan. Committed to service.

Talk with anyone who's known former North Dakota Supreme Court Chief Justice Jerry VandeWalle and those words will usually come out.

Most importantly, they also often point out how VandeWalle's character and remarkable 65-year career in state government, with 45 of those on the Supreme Court bench and over half as "the Chief," can be an example to all public servants in the state going forward.

He set that high of a bar.

Besides his long service within North Dakota, VandeWalle also became well respected nationally, with those character traits driving him to leadership roles in organizations like the American Bar Association and the Conference of Chief Justices.

Those interested in learning more about VandeWalle will be able to do so when a biography of his life, "Call me Jerry," is officially released on Feb. 2, at a 4:30 p.m. launch event at the North Dakota Heritage Center in Bismarck.

Both VandeWalle and author Cecile Wehrman will be present at the free public book release and give remarks at the event and reception afterwards.

The biography chronicles his life from his start as a son of Belgian immigrants in Noonan, North Dakota in the state's northwest through his formative years studying at the University of North Dakota.

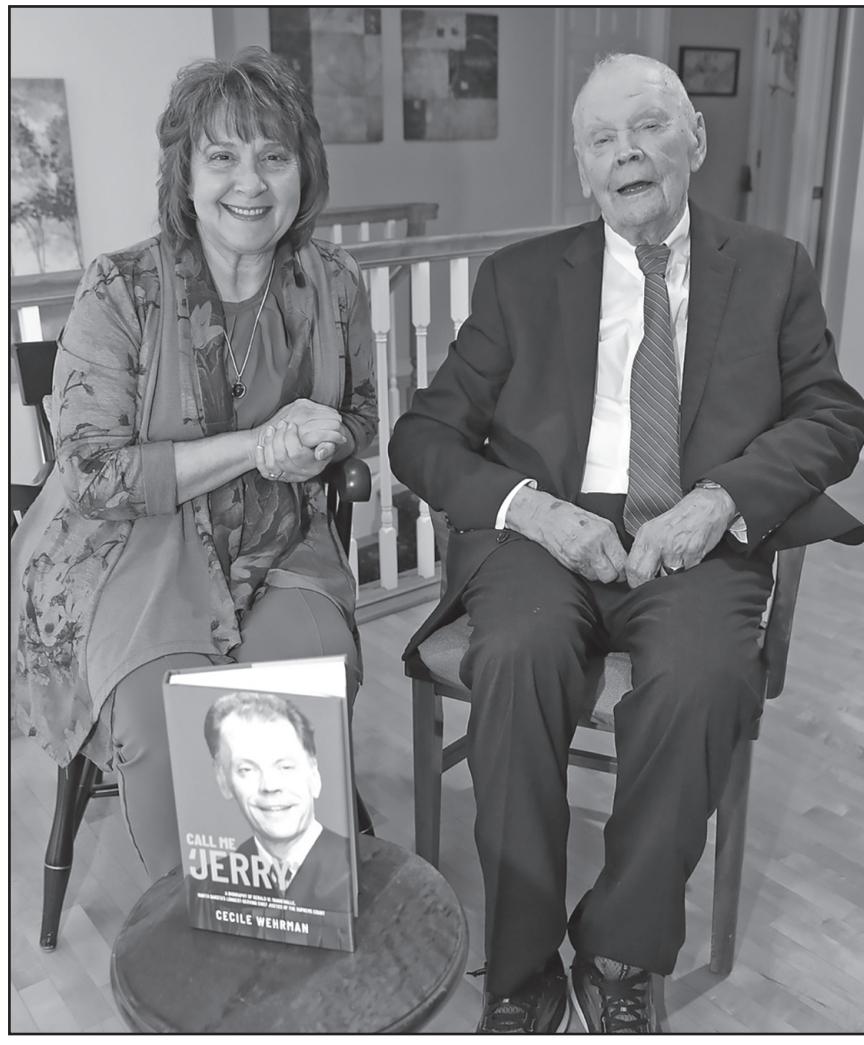
Midway through, the book delves into a detailed account of his decades of service in Bismarck in the attorney general's office and then at the Supreme Court, as well as examining his lasting legacy in the final chapters.

"I'll be interested in hearing what people think about it," VandeWalle said during an interview at his home about the book. "I wanted to come across as just plain Jerry. I didn't try to gain any acclaim, necessarily. And yet it came."

Acclaim did come from his long career.

Besides the many state and national law awards detailed in the book, VandeWalle was also awarded North Dakota's Rough Rider award in 2015, and his portrait stands in the Theodore Roosevelt Rough Rider Hall of Fame at the State Capitol in Bismarck.

The book was commissioned by



North Dakota's longest serving Supreme Court Chief Justice Jerry VandeWalle poses with a copy of his biography, "Call Me Jerry" along with author Cecile Wehrman. Photo by Brad Nygaard, The Journal, Crosby.

the Trustees of the John & Elaine Andrist Charitable Trust in 2020, and initially taken on by Pulitzer Prize winning former Grand Forks Herald Publisher Mike Jacobs.

As part of the process, Jacobs conducted six hours of interviews with VandeWalle, as well as video-taped interviews with five attorneys general, two governors, and dozens of legislators, friends and family of VandeWalle.

Wehrman took on the project in November 2024, conducting further interviews and writing the final manuscript.

Wehrman said VandeWalle faced some initial difficulties when he first got to the Supreme Court, which are laid out in the book. One of those was how his position impacted his perception in the eyes of others.

"Personally, he's such a social person, and almost immediately, when he went to the court, he noticed how people reacted to him differently and weren't calling him or speaking candidly with him, and that was a huge adjustment for him," Wehrman said. "At one point, he asked himself, gosh have I made the biggest mistake in my life?"

VandeWalle's years on the court saw him oversee a restructuring of the state's judicial system, how school funding is distributed,

reforms in family law mediation for better outcomes in custody cases, as well as saw him issue groundbreaking opinions on cases of same sex custody arrangements and the taxation of out-of-state companies.

The book also details early life lessons growing up on a dairy farm and how his experience being raised in a devout Flemish Catholic family in a sea of Norwegian Lutherans shaped his character, as well as how his parents and other members of his community were pillars of that formation.

Most impactful throughout his life was the influence of his mother Blanche, who VandeWalle cared for from the early 1970s until her death at the age of 102 in 2006, with much of that time as her caregiver in Bismarck. His father, a WWI hero, was also extremely influential to him, he said.

"He was devoted to her," Wehrman said of his dedication to his mother. "He did so much for her and I tried to make that clear in the book. Without being able to interview her or review writings of hers, I wish there were more about her in the book, because it was all secondhand. She lived with him for 35 years. That's longer than many marriages."

Levi Andrist, who served as a law

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## Use IRS Free File to conveniently file your return at no cost

IRS Free File began accepting individual tax returns on Jan. 9, giving eligible taxpayers an early opportunity to prepare and file their federal income tax returns ahead of the official start of the 2026 filing season later this month.

While the filing season begins later this month, IRS Free File Guided Tax Software allows taxpayers to prepare and submit returns now and hold them for electronic filing once the season officially begins.

For 2026, eight private-sector partners are offering guided tax software products through IRS Free File to taxpayers with an Adjusted Gross Income of \$89,000 or less in 2025.

Taxpayers with an AGI above \$89,000 can use the Free File Fillable Forms, available beginning Jan. 26. These electronic versions of IRS paper forms are ideal for individuals who are comfortable preparing their own taxes using IRS instructions and publications.

Understanding IRS Free File

Each IRS Free File trusted partner sets its own eligibility requirements.

which may include age, income, state residency and military status. Taxpayers and active-duty military personnel with an AGI of \$89,000 or less in 2025 can find a free federal filing option; some partners also offer free state tax return preparation and filing.

### Claim tax credits at no cost

IRS Free File allows eligible taxpayers to claim valuable tax benefits, including the Earned Income Tax Credit, the Child Tax Credit and other refundable credits. Refundable tax credits can reduce the amount of tax owed or result in a refund, even if no tax is due.

### How to find the right IRS Free File product

Taxpayers can find the right product by visiting IRS.gov/freefile and:

1. Select "Explore Free Guided Tax Software", then select the "Find a Trusted Partner" tool for help in finding the right product, or
2. Use "Browse All Trusted Partners" to review each offer,
3. Choose the product that

best fits their situation, and

4. Follow the links to the trusted partner's website to begin their tax return.

IRS Free File works on computers, smartphones or tablets.

### 2026 IRS Free File participants

The following trusted partners are participating in IRS Free File for 2026:

- 1040Now
- Drake (1040.com)
- ezTaxReturn.com (offers English and Spanish)
- FileYourTaxes.com
- On-Line Taxes
- TaxAct
- TaxHawk (FreeTaxUSA)
- TaxSlayer

IRS Free File helps taxpayers save money and file their taxes quickly and securely. For more information or to get started on a tax return today, visit IRS Free File: Do Your Taxes For Free.

## Public feedback sought on future of North Dakota education

State School Superintendent Levi Bachmeier is inviting families, students, and community members to take part in a statewide education survey to gather public perspectives on key subjects that affect students, schools, and the future of education across North Dakota.

"With a shared definition of success, I believe North Dakota can lead the nation with America's best schools," Bachmeier said. "This survey provides an opportunity for citizens across our state to share their priorities, so we can ensure that our definition of educational success considers the perspectives of those

inside and outside our schools."

The online survey is open to the public and will be accessible through Friday, Feb. 6. The survey can be found online at [bit.ly/4jGVxjc](http://bit.ly/4jGVxjc)

Bachmeier will compile and share survey results with state boards and committees that help shape North Dakota's long-term education strategy. Public opinion will help inform decisions and priorities aimed at improving student outcomes statewide. The survey results will be used to update the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction's own strategic plan.

## New NFIB survey: Small business optimism continues to rise

Uncertainty declines to lowest level since June 2024

The NFIB Small Business Optimism Index rose 0.5 points in December to 99.5 and remained above its 52-year average of 98. Of the 10 Optimism Index components, two increased, three decreased, and five were unchanged. An increase in those expecting better business conditions primarily drove the rise in the Optimism Index. The Uncertainty Index fell 7 points from November to 84, the lowest reading since June 2024.

"2025 ended with a further increase in small business optimism," said NFIB Chief Economist Bill Dunkelberg. "While Main Street business owners remain concerned about taxes, they anticipate favorable economic conditions in 2026 due to waning cost pressures, easing labor challenges, and an increase in capital investments."

"While the federal report highlights a pick-up in capital investments, North Dakota's small business owners remain cautious," said NFIB North Dakota State Director Don Larson. "For our state to thrive in 2026, we must address the 19% of owners who still cite labor quality as their top concern, ensuring our workforce can meet the demands of our growing industries."

In conjunction with the December report, NFIB also released a new episode of the "Small Business by the Numbers" podcast. This is the NFIB Research Center's new podcast, where co-hosts Holly Wade, the executive director of the NFIB Research Center, and Peter Hansen, director of research and policy analysis, discuss the data, stories, and economic conditions affecting small businesses nationwide.

### Key findings include:

- Twenty percent of small business owners reported taxes as their single most important problem, up 6 points from November and ranking as the top problem. This is the highest reading since May 2021.
- In December, both actual and planned prices fell from the previous month. The net percent of owners raising average selling prices fell 4 points from November to a net 30% (seasonally adjusted). A net 28% (seasonally adjusted) plan to increase prices in the next three months (down 2 points).
- A net negative 3% of owners reported paying a higher interest rate on their most recent loan, down 5 points from November

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## Round two: North Dakota Democrat Trygve Hammer announces second run for US House

By Michael Achterling/North Dakota Monitor

Democrat Trygve Hammer announced Monday he plans to run for North Dakota's lone U.S. House seat for a second time.

Hammer, of Minot, said Republican incumbent Rep. Julie Fedorchak hasn't delivered on campaign promises of addressing affordable housing and health care costs. He also said Fedorchak and Republicans in Congress have failed to provide a check on President Donald Trump's power on tariffs and his perceived war powers.

"There's a lot of disappointment going on in North Dakota," Hammer said in an interview Monday with Joel Heitkamp on KFGO.

In 2024, Hammer received 30% of the statewide vote while Fedorchak received 70%.

Hammer said while affordability issues are not being addressed in Washington, actions in Venezuela and discussions on acquiring Greenland are instead taking center stage.

"We have wrecked ag markets," Hammer said. "There's a lot of consternation out there, and a lot of people aren't getting what they voted for."

One of the only ways to fix those problems is for Congress to take back its power, he said.

"If our federal delegation would act as a check on the worst impulses of the Trump administration, they would make it a better presidency," Hammer said in an interview with the North Dakota Monitor on Monday.



Democratic-NPL U.S. House candidate Trygve Hammer speaks with voters during an event at the North Dakota Kennedy Center on July 30, 2024. Hammer announced he is running for the seat again this year. (Photo by Michael Achterling/North Dakota Monitor)

Hammer has diverse work and military experience, which included the Naval Academy where he became a Marine helicopter pilot, and a deployment to Iraq in 2003 as a platoon commander. Hammer also worked in the Bakken oil field and as a science teacher in Granville.

He also worked as a train conductor in Minot before taking leave to make his congressional run.

Hammer had unsuccessful runs for the North Dakota Public Service Commission in 2022 and the North Dakota Legislature in 2020.

Fedorchak previously announced plans to seek reelection. Trump endorsed Fedorchak's reelection bid in a social media post last summer.

Alex Balazs, who received the North Dakota Republican Party endorsement in 2024 but lost in the primary, also announced he's running again this year.