

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

By Michael Standaert
North Dakota News Cooperative
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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 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 videotaped 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.

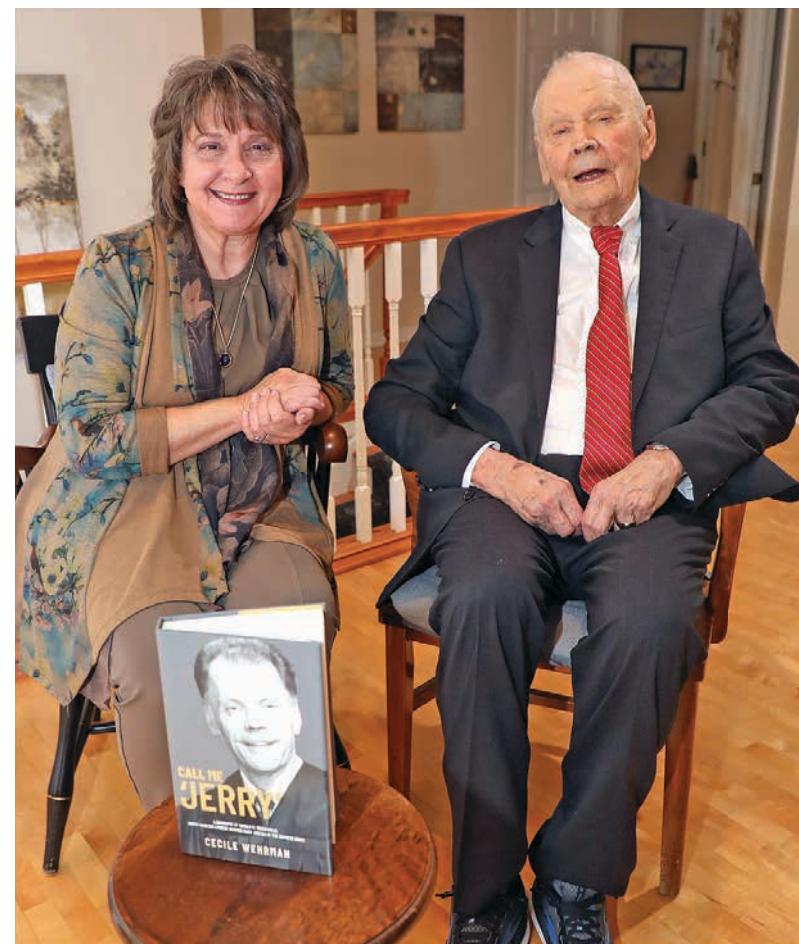
"Personally, he's such a social person, and almost immediately, when he went to the court, he noticed how people reacted to him differently and weren't calling him or speaking candidly with him, and that was a huge adjustment for him," Wehrman said. "At one point, he asked himself, gosh have I made the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

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, I wish to review writings of hers, I wish



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.

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 clerk for VandeWalle in 2010-11 and who spearheaded the commissioning of the biography, said one of the most compelling things for him about VandeWalle was his fidelity to public service.

"He never married, he took care of his mom, and he literally dedicated his whole life to the state and the country," Andrist said.

"I think kind of setting that as like an almost unattainable goal, or benchmark, in 2026 and beyond is perhaps a little overwhelming for those thinking about public service, but I think that's worth celebrating and pursuing," he said.

Born Aug. 15, 1933 during one of the driest years on record, Gerald VandeWalle said that besides his parents and his immediate family his egalitarian childhood among the farmers and miners in the Noonan community was also formative. Most in the tight knit community were neither rich nor poor, he said.

VandeWalle vividly remembers the owner of the local drugstore telling him as a child, "If you ever go out, if you embarrass yourself, you embarrass the whole community," which he said surprised him.

"That stuck with me all the years," he said.

Bismarck-based attorney and lobbyist Jack McDonald, who has known VandeWalle since helping him with his first Supreme Court election campaign in 1978, said that besides his importance in the state and through national legal organizations, what impressed him most was "the Chief's" kindness.

"What stood out all the time is how attentive he was to everybody, and how kind he was to people, even though he was Chief Justice," McDonald said. "It constantly amazed me."

The other aspect was his sincerity and honesty, he said.

"He was extremely well respected by legislators no matter what and no matter what party it was," McDonald said.

VandeWalle's deep respect for the law and the standards of the legal system, as well as his egalitarian, humble and non-partisan nature, give him pause when looking at how the Supreme Court and other influential courts are now perceived at the national level, he said.

VandeWalle said framing by the national press over the years about liberal versus conservative judges – with stories often referring to the president and the politics of that president who appointed them instead of focusing more on the issues or decisions they preside over – is something that's bothered him for some time.

It hasn't helped that in recent years presidents have been playing into that and politicizing the courts.

"I'm concerned about the stature of courts generally after all this is through, because I think they're going to be considered just another branch of government," VandeWalle said.

Copies of the book will be available at the North Dakota Heritage Center and online.

The North Dakota News Cooperative is a non-profit news organization providing reliable and independent reporting on issues and events that impact the lives of North



Bristol has 100 wins

Harvey-Wells County sophomore wrestler Bristol Fike recorded her 100th win last week. Coach Justin Lematta is the HWC girls wrestling coach.



The First Lutheran Church of Harvey Women recently delivered classroom supplies to B.M. Hanson Elementary School and Harvey High School.

in Harvey. The money raised for these supplies was from a sale held last fall, plus an additional donation from the church women.

Everyone's support for mission is greatly appreciated.

On the left a representative from Harvey High School, and below is the B.M. Hanson Elementary School accepting their supplies.



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