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Asbestos attorney Kathy Byrne, daughter of late mayor, dies at 66

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Kathy Byrne, a prominent asbestos attorney and the only child of former Chicago mayor Jane Byrne, died Thursday after a short illness, her firm said.

Byrne, 66, was diagnosed with lung cancer in May and died at Rush University Medical Center.

She was a partner at Cooney & Conway and worked as an asbestos litigator for over three decades.

Robert J. Cooney Jr., a partner at the firm, said Byrne continued to work after her diagnosis and was “doing the best she could between tests and treatment.”

Cooney first met Byrne in 1987 when she was clerking at the firm as a student at Loyola University Chicago School of Law. She joined the firm the following year.

Byrne was a “first-rate advocate and legal thinker” with “an absolute passion for what she did for her clients,” Cooney said.

“She was brilliant,” he said. “She was passionate about what she did and about what we did. She was very well-respected and very well-liked by everyone.”

Cooney noted Byrne’s work on the asbestos case *Cynthia Cowger v. Qualitex Co.*, No. 2018 L 12099, which returned a \$23 million verdict for a

woman who developed mesothelioma after handling asbestos while working for a manufacturing company.

“Going back to the 1980s, she was trying cases in both state court and federal court, and she had a particular ability to also handle work in the appellate court and in the Supreme Court of Illinois, as well as the federal district court,” he said. “She was everywhere that you could be as an advocate.”

Cooney said Byrne was a “real Irish woman,” with an interest in national and local politics and a self-deprecating sense of humor.

“She took everything she did very, very seriously, but she never took herself seriously at all,” he said. “In other words, she was extremely modest.”

Tobin J. Taylor, managing partner of Heyl Royster and a frequent legal opponent of Byrne’s, said in an email that she was a “worthy adversary” who he eventually developed a friendship with and that her “input over the years helped to create a system that has for decades effectively managed high volume, high stakes litigation in way that has been emulated around the country.”

“Kathy had the ability to zealously advocate for her clients in a professional, courteous, and reasonable manner,” he said. “Her word was her bond.”

Fellow Cooney & Conway partner Kevin J. Conway noted that Byrne was the only woman attorney at the firm for many years but was never afraid to speak her mind among her colleagues.

“She never let that bother her,” he said. “She was great, and we all knew she was great.”

Conway said Byrne set herself apart from her mother’s accomplishments and didn’t rely on her connections for career success. He recalled after Maggie Daley Park was named, Byrne was asked by City Hall representatives of a landmark that they could name after her mother.

“Her answer was City Hall,” Conway said.

In 2014, the Circle Interchange was renamed for Jane Byrne, who died that year.

Conway noted Kathy Byrne’s influence during the childhood of his daughters, Judith Conway of Cooney & Conway and Kathryn L. Conway of

Power Rogers LLP. He recalled Kathryn's interest in visiting the firm at a young age after playing with a pair of high heels that Byrne kept in her office.

"It was something that made her think 'I could be a lawyer, I like the law firm,' even though she's 5 years old," he said. "... Kathy was there, and she liked being a lawyer, and so I think it was a big motivator for her. And of course her younger sister, Judy Connelly, is at our law firm today and I think she was influenced by Kathy also."

In a 2023 interview as with the Chicago Daily Law Bulletin, Byrne reflected on the influence of her trailblazing mother, the city's first woman mayor, on her own career.

"I didn't really look around and say 'No one else here is in a skirt,'" Byrne told the Chicago Daily Law Bulletin in 2023. "It just didn't dawn on me. And I don't think it dawned on her. She was just doing what she did, and so being her daughter, I just did it."

Byrne was the immediate past president of the Illinois Trial Lawyers' Association (ITLA), the second woman to hold that position. She was an active member of the group since 1997.

"The entire Illinois Trial Lawyers Association, me included, are heartbroken about the passing of our immediate past president, Kathy Byrne," ITLA President Sara M. Salger said in a statement. "Kathy was a remarkable lawyer, role model and friend and the world is a much sadder place without her in it.

"She was a true advocate for our clients, and we were fortunate to have her as such an integral part of our organization for so many years," Salger said. "She will be greatly missed by all who knew her, and our thoughts and prayers go out to her family and firm at this difficult time."

Byrne is survived by her son William "Willy" Vogt, a law student at the University of Kentucky J. David Rosenberg College of Law.

Details on services are pending.

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