

In Memory of Thomas A. Beckett K.C.

Herb Huffman, Maralee Beckett & Kevin Land

The Hamilton legal community, along with environmentalists and conservationists everywhere, have lost a mentor, jurist, friend, advocate, and gifted raconteur with the passing of the Honourable Thomas A Beckett K.C. J.D. LLD, on August 23rd, at the age of 97.

Tom graduated from the University of Toronto Law School in 1950, one of only 15 out of 75 in his class to do so, and one of only two with honours. He began his legal career in Calgary with the firm R.B. Bennett, moving to Hamilton a few years later to join Treleven & Milne, before partnering with Ed Shaker and then later with the Honourable Justice Ray Harris, in the firm which ultimately became Beckett, Harris and Henderson. He often shared stories of many friendships with early legal advocates, including such notables as John Bowlby and John Agro. His office in the penthouse of the Roy-

al Connaught was, like Tom, a source of entertainment as well as the practice of law, and the stories were never ending. In 1984, Tom was appointed to the Unified Family Court in Hamilton as a judge of the District Court of Ontario, later becoming a judge of

the Superior Court of Justice. Perhaps the most notorious case he presided over occurred early in his time on the bench. This was the custody hearing that was deemed the most infamous ritual child abuse case in Canadian history, which ran from 1985-1987.



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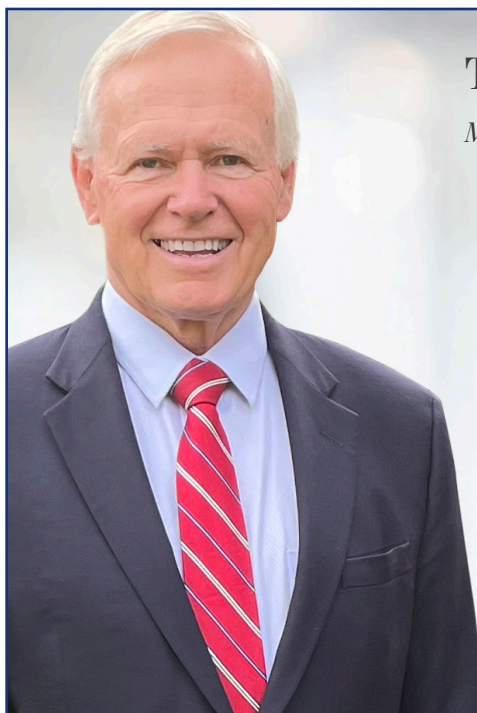
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It was a case that remained with him the rest of his life, long after he retired from the Superior Court of Justice in 2000.

In addition to practicing law, Tom contributed extensively to the betterment of his community by taking on many public challenges, such as becoming a founding member and first chairman of the Spencer Creek Conservation Authority, and later as the first chairman of the Hamilton Conservation Authority. During his tenure at the Authority, thousands of acres of significant lands were acquired, protected, and preserved in the Hamilton area; lands that Hamiltonians and many others continue to enjoy today. His extensive efforts in these initiatives resulted in his being appointed president of the Institute of Ecology, a prestigious academic organization in Washington, DC.

In 1973, the Hamilton Spectator wrote “the name Thomas Beckett is synonymous with Conservation... the results of his unqualified drive and dedication have been experienced all over Ontario... thousands of acres of open space have been preserved because of his efforts, and countless individuals have become concerned with the environment through his example”.

Tom has been recognized for his tireless work in the Hamilton community with several honours and awards. The Hamilton Conservation Authority, in appreciation of his immense conservation acquisitions, established the Thomas A. Beckett Forest in the Dundas Valley Conservation Area in 1998. In 1999 he was inducted into the Hamilton Gallery of Distinction. Other awards include a lifetime achievement award from the Bay Area Restoration Council. In 2019, McMaster University bestowed upon him an Honourary Doctor of Laws. Although he suffered from poor mobility and was practical-



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ly blind, the powerful commencement address he delivered encouraging the graduates to maintain community service as part of their future was both fitting and moving. Afterwards, he claimed receiving the degree was the pinnacle of his public life.

Anyone interested in getting further insight into Tom would be rewarded by reading his memoir, “My Path to the Dundas Valley”, which was published in 2018, when he was 92. In addition to further insights into his activities in a legal or environmental setting, his talent for storytelling shines out. Most notable are the stories of his client who was on the run from a New York organized crime outfit because of the knowledge he had about the Kennedy assassination, his tour of the jail in Hamilton following its last hanging, and his recounting of the time he and his young family “crashed” a KKK

rally in the Deep South while pretending to be sympathizers. It was no accident that he was well-known for his advocacy of individual rights.

Tom had a profound impact on countless people he encountered during his life, whether through his law practice, dispensing justice in the family court, as a councillor in Ancaster, in his political life, and most importantly, through his efforts to preserve large tracts of green spaces in the Hamilton area for all to enjoy. He will be missed. ■