

OBITUARIES

Mob prosecutor David Margolis dies at 76

BY MATT SCHUDEL
THE WASHINGTON POST

David Margolis, a colorful Justice Department lawyer who directed the prosecutions of dozens of mobsters as head of the organized crime section and later was called on to resolve sensitive ethical and disciplinary matters, including high-profile cases that involved the White House and CIA, died July 12 at a hospital in Fairfax County, Virginia. He was 76.

He had a heart-related illness, said his wife, Debby Margolis.

Margolis, who began working for the Justice Department in 1965 during the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson, was the longest-serving lawyer currently with the department. After leading the Organized Crime and Racketeering Section from 1979 to 1993, he became associate deputy attorney general, a position he held until his death.

In addition to planning prosecution efforts against organized-crime figures, Margolis took part in cases involving foreign dictators and the Abscam trials of bribe-taking congressmen. He later investigated controversies surrounding the

death of deputy White House counsel Vincent Foster Jr., accusations of torture during the George W. Bush administration and the leaking of the identity of CIA officer Valerie Plame.

“We would give all the hairballs to [Margolis], all the hardest, most difficult problems, the most politically controversial,” FBI Director James Comey, a former deputy attorney general, told The Washington Post last year.

Margolis was also known for his humor, his outlandish wardrobe and his institutional memory of the Justice Department, which he joined when Nicholas Katzenbach was attorney general and J. Edgar Hoover was director of the FBI. Over the years, Margolis served under 19 attorneys general.

In a department where conservative dress is the norm, Margolis cut an eccentric figure. He wore pink leisure suits, cowboy boots and, for years, shoulder-length hair.

“There were times, more than once, when we were sitting in his office, and he was called away to a meeting with the attorney general,” Paul Coffey, who worked with Margolis for 30 years

and succeeded him as chief of the Organized Crime and Racketeering Section, recalled Wednesday. “He was wearing bell-bottom blue jeans, a baseball T-shirt with a picture of Jerry Jeff Walker on the front, and the words ‘Whiskey Bent and Hellbound’ on the back. He wore that outfit constantly. He’d go up to meetings with the AGs dressed like that, with perfect aplomb. It was almost a rite of passage for the AGs to show that they could be flexible.”

Margolis could be the exception with his dress, Coffey said, because he stood out as a prosecutor and legal thinker: “He was so good, he became a universe of his own.”

During his 24 years with the organized crime section — including 14 years as chief — Margolis and his team of about 160 federal prosecutors won convictions against all five of New York’s major Cosa Nostra families, plus the leading crime syndicates in Boston, Newark, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Detroit and New Orleans.

“We really brought the mob to its knees all over the country,” Margolis told The Post.

In the early 1980s, the Jus-

tice Department ruled that all prosecutions under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, or RICO, had to go through the OCRS and Margolis. As a result, he took part in cases against deposed Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos, Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega, federal judges and congressmen caught up in the Abscam bribery case. Ultimately, seven members of Congress were convicted.

“In the 30 years I worked with him,” Coffey said of Margolis, “I never once saw him lose his composure or raise his voice in anger. When things were important, and there was a crisis underway, he never, ever lost his cool.”

In 1993, after Foster died in an apparent suicide, Margolis was one of two lawyers from the Justice Department assigned to examine Foster’s White House office for any evidence of a suicide note or possible extortion. Once he got there, Margolis later testified, he was kept at arm’s length by White House counsel Bernard Nussbaum, who decided what the Justice Department lawyers were allowed to see.

Two years later, in politically charged hearings, Mar-

golis told a Senate panel that he was prevented from doing his job by Nussbaum.

It took the White House six days to produce the torn pieces of paper that proved to be Foster’s suicide note. Margolis told the Senate panel that if he had been permitted to conduct a proper search, “I’d either have found it or I’d be out on my tail.”

The shadow surrounding Foster’s death continues to haunt the legacy of President Bill Clinton.

In 2010, Margolis released a 69-page report evaluating a ruling by the Justice Department’s Office of Professional Responsibility concerning decisions made by lawyers in the administration of President George W. Bush. The OPR’s ethics lawyers found that two lawyers in the Bush White House, John Yoo and Jay S. Bybee, had demonstrated “professional misconduct” by providing legal justification of waterboarding and other enhanced interrogation methods.

Margolis rejected that finding. The lawyers may have used “flawed,” ideologically motivated reasoning, but he determined that their advice did not constitute misconduct that merited disciplinary action.

It was, Margolis said, the decision “I agonized over most. I knew it would be controversial whichever way it came down.”

David Margolis was born Dec. 18, 1939, in Hartford, Conn. His father was superintendent of maintenance for the public school system, and his mother was a teacher.

He graduated from Brown University in 1961 and from Harvard Law School in 1964. He worked on organized crime cases in Hartford, Cleveland and Brooklyn before coming to Washington in 1976.

Survivors include his wife of 47 years, the former Debby Lipman of Reston; two daughters, Kim Margolis of Bristow, Virginia, and Cheryl Margolis of Fairfax County, Virginia; a brother; and three grandchildren.

Margolis was a gifted raconteur with what Coffey described as “a photographic memory for names and places and events.”

He also never missed a chance to tell a joke. In 1995, Margolis appeared before a congressional committee shortly after undergoing quadruple bypass surgery. He was asked if he was comfortable.

“No,” he said. “But I make a living.”

Tiny

Continued from Page C1

plus half-dozen or so permanent residents who would assist in building other tiny houses on the property.

In a rent-to-own model, Plummer would pre-build several tiny houses on the property. Temporary Eco Village residents would pay \$300 per month in rent to live in one of those houses plus additional \$500 per month to cover the cost of building their own tiny house in the village.

At the end of four years that resident would own the new tiny house. They have the option to extend the lease for an additional year but must move off the land by the end of that period.

At the end of four years, a member of Tiny Soul-ar Eco Village would own their own home with about \$26,000 in equity — including furnishings — and ready to look for their own plot of land on which to move it. Plummer envisions multiple tiny houses being built at a time in the village with new residents coming in to replace those who move on.

“I want people to be able to build their own tiny houses but not move to the village indefinitely,” Plummer said. “At the end of four years, they would own their own tiny house outright and would then pick it up and move.”

That, he said, would make room for the next person looking to get into affordable, tiny house living. It’s that aspect of helping new homeowners that attracts Sonya Connelly to Plummer’s vision.

“What really resonates with me and gets me excited about the eco-village is the concept of it being self-sufficient [and] the idea of helping people who could not own traditional homes develop the financial freedom to own their own homes,” Connelly said.

“While living in the village, they would also enjoy the cooperative aspects of communal living,” Plummer said. “Among other things, sharing common tools and in working together in chores like gardening and operating a farm stand.”

Connelly met Plummer last October through social media and said he put her in touch with a tiny home resident in the Ellsworth area.

“I was able to visit that tiny home to see if it was something I’d like and could do,” she said.

Instead of build her own tiny home, Connelly said she purchased a vintage Airstream travel trailer and is living in it on friend’s land in Ellsworth. She de-

scribed her pre-tiny living life in New York City as living “a hamster wheel,” working to pay rent with little left over.

“I wanted something different,” she said. “Now my overhead is a tenth of what it was in New York City.”

Helping people find that greater financial freedom through cooperative living is something Connelly wants to be part of in the planned eco-village. Community cooperation, helping each other, shared resources and bartering would all be part of life in Tiny Soul-ar Eco Village, according to Plummer. Established residents also would help newcomers build their own tiny houses, he said.

Plummer is fully aware some may view his plan as an attempt to establish a Utopian village and stressed there will be rules by which residents must abide.

“I have been doing a lot of reading on different types of governance,” he said. “That’s one of the reasons I want to purchase and hold the land privately, so I have a say on what happens on it.”

Plummer envisions an advisory board of residents running the day-to-day operations of Tiny Soul-ar Eco Village with an outside board of directors he will establish as a legal entity to enforce the rules.

“The board [of directors] would be the rule-makers, but I don’t want them running the community,” he said. “Ideally, they will ‘rubber stamp’ what the advisory board recommends, but [the board of directors] will be the bad guys [and enforce rules] if needs be.”

Plummer may currently lack the land for his village — he is actively looking for an affordable parcel in the southern Maine area — but there is no lack of interest from people looking to start tiny house living.

“I am fully behind this community,” David Philips of Portland said. “I like the manageability of living in a tiny house and how that will effect my quality of life.”

The 53-year-old anesthesia technologist is living in a traditional house but said he is ready to downsize to a tiny house.

“I know my level of determination, and [living in] a tiny house makes so much sense for so many reasons,” Philips said. “Living what I call a larger life with so many possessions takes a lot of space and time, and I have really started re-evaluating how I want to spend my time, and living in a tiny house village would allow more time for me and just living life.”

Plummer has started bringing potential tiny village residents together, at least online with 189 regis-



SONYA CONNELLY

Sonya Connelly moved to Maine from New York City to live tiny. The 44-year-old said downsizing and living in a vintage Airstream is allowing her financial freedom she never had when renting in larger cities.

tered members of his Meet-Up Group and nearly 200 followers on his Tiny House Peeps of Southern Maine Facebook page. There is also a website devoted to the plan.

“There are absolutely people who are interested in this,” Plummer said. “By being online we can remain connected and share ideas.”

Plummer said he’s been talking to people for several years, ranging from first-time home buyers to retirees.

“There are a bunch of different reasons they are interested in living tiny,” he said. “Some are sick of collecting stuff, some are tired of a high cost of living and some see the writing on the wall and want to start living in an environmentally, sustainable manner.”

Plummer’s planned village will be on the utility grid, but residents will be encouraged to build homes that are highly energy efficient.

Philips is all in.

“When I started thinking about tiny living, I started looking around and found out about what [Alan Plummer] is planning,” he said “I’m excited to be part of the online community.”

Plummer hopes to take

his planned village from the drawing board to reality within the next year or so.

“Right now [I’m] just looking for the right piece of affordable land,” he said.

A reverse mortgage could help you live more comfortably.

- Supplement your retirement
- Pay off your mortgage
- Buy a home
- Lifetime monthly payment

Heidi Eastman

Reverse Mortgage Advisor
NMLS #1200643
(207) 299-7283
heastman@rfslend.com
www.rfslend.com



These materials are not from HUD or FHA and the document was not approved by HUD, FHA or any Government Agency.

Synergy One Lending Inc. d/b/a Retirement Funding Solutions, NMLS 1025894; Maine Supervised Lender License 1025894.



FUNDING AMERICA'S RETIREMENT

RETIREMENT
FUNDING
SOLUTIONS