

The Honorable Joseph E. Irenas His Life and Accomplishments



Joseph E. Irenas, born in Newark in 1940, has spent his entire life in New Jersey, except for his three years at Harvard Law School. He met his future wife Nancy on the first day of sixth grade, when they were paired to share a book. According to Joe, she is still waiting for him to catch up. He was quick to grow, however, and stood taller than six feet in the sixth grade.

In the 10th grade, Joe transferred from public school to the Pingry School in Hillside, where he was the sports editor of the *Pingry Record*. More than 50 years later, Joe received the prestigious Letter-in-Life Award. "Pingry takes great pride that Judge Irenas '58 is the 2009 recipient, as his career has set the highest standards of ethics and morality," stated Pingry Alumni Association President Steve Lipper.

Joe graduated from Princeton University in 1962 with a major in political science (after switching from a pre-med course of study). He married Nancy the same year. While attending law school at Harvard, the Irenas' had their first child. Joe earned his Juris Doctor degree *cum laude* in 1965.

Joe and Nancy have two children: Teddy and Amy. Teddy is a talented musician who was an early member of the "Blues Traveler," a rock band formed in Princeton in 1987. Amy is an attorney and board-certified neurologist who currently is engaged in pharmaceutical research. Now retired, Nancy is a social worker who did group counseling for families affected by mental illness and individual therapy for consumers.

After graduating from law school, Joe clerked for NJ Supreme Court Justice Hayden Proctor for one year. He then worked for McCarter and English (M&E) from 1966 to 1992, becoming a partner in 1972. When he started at M&E, it was NJ's oldest and largest law firm with 19 attorneys. Today, it still is NJ's largest with more than 400 attorneys. Joe's litigation work with M&E was very wide and diverse, and he enjoyed every moment. He founded the firm's bankruptcy and environmental practice departments. He also had a large banking practice. Joe represented *Playboy Magazine* for many years, attending meetings at the Mansion where everyone dressed in suits except for Hugh Hefner, who wore a silk bathrobe.

While working for M&E, Joe did lots of pro bono work for the community. He tutored minority law school graduates who had flunked the bar exam multiple times. After the Newark riots of 1969, he represented some of the people who were arrested. He became active with United Hospital in Newark and was elected chairman of the board in 1982. This hospital, which had an exceptional children's unit at one time, closed in 1997. Joe also served as director and treasurer of the Newark Area United Way, the largest affiliate in NJ.

Irenas was nominated to the United States District Court for the District of New Jersey by President George Bush on November 14, 1991. Irenas was confirmed by the U.S. Senate on April 8, 1992 and received his federal commission on April 13, 1992. He assumed senior status on July 1, 2002 and continues in this capacity to this day.

Throughout his long career on the bench, Judge Irenas has presided over many famous (and infamous) trials. The longest criminal case in the country was tried in his court. In 1998, following a nine-and-a-half-month jury trial, Daniel Enright and Demetrios Karamanos were convicted for their role in one of the nation's largest fuel excise tax schemes. In 1997, Judge Irenas tried an assault case against Notorious B.I.G. (aka Biggie Smalls) and heard testimony by Sean Puffy Combs

(aka Puff Daddy, Diddy, and P. Diddy) and Lil Kim. Biggie, who was found liable, was murdered shortly thereafter in California.

In addition to his judgeship, Joe taught at Rutgers Camden Law School for 17 years. He remains active in his class at Princeton, which recently celebrated its 50th reunion. He also serves on the Advisory Board of Opera NJ. In his spare time, Joe enjoys playing poker with his friends.

And, in 2007, the Irenas' joined the NAMI Mercer family. Joe was most impressed by the organization's "valiant effort to challenge the myths of mental illness, especially the misconception that people affected by mental illness do not want to interact with others." According to Joe, "keeping a social life is very, very difficult. With its Just Friends program, NAMI provides the superstructure to assist people in making friends and practicing the social skills they need for life."