



Justice R. Fred Lewis

December 14, 1947 - May 26, 2026

R. Fred Lewis, former Chief Justice of the Florida Supreme Court, passed away on May 26, 2026, surrounded by the love of his family following complications from injuries sustained in a fall. He was 78 years old.

The life of Fred Lewis was a remarkable American story—one that began in the coal fields of southern West Virginia and carried him to the highest levels of Florida's legal system. Along the way, he became an accomplished athlete, scholar, soldier, lawyer, educator, mentor, husband, father, grandfather, and one of the most respected jurists in Florida history. Yet no matter how far his journey carried him, he never forgot where it began.

Born on December 14, 1947, in Beckley, West Virginia, to William Fred Lewis and Dorothy B. Clower Lewis, Fred grew up among the hardworking families of Appalachia. The values that would guide his life—hard work, perseverance, fairness, loyalty, humility, and respect for the dignity of every person—were forged there. He often reflected on the experiences of coal miners and their families, including the coal company stores and scrip system that shaped generations of Appalachian communities. Those stories were not simply family history; they were lessons about opportunity, justice, accountability, and human dignity that remained with him throughout his life.

Long after he left West Virginia, Fred proudly displayed pieces of coal

gathered near his childhood home and his grandfather's carbide miner's lamp in his office and later in his chambers on the Florida Supreme Court. They served as daily reminders of the people, sacrifices, and values that shaped him.

At Woodrow Wilson High School in Beckley, Fred excelled in academics, athletics, and leadership. He served as student body president, earned statewide and national recognition as a scholar-athlete, and helped lead Beckley to a state basketball championship. A gifted point guard known for his leadership, competitiveness, and toughness, he earned All-State and All-American honors and received the Pete George Memorial Award recognizing outstanding achievement as a scholar-athlete. In 2018, he was inducted into the West Virginia Sports Legends Hall of Fame, an honor that meant a great deal to him because it connected him once again to the place and people who had shaped his earliest years.

While proud of his accomplishments on the court, Fred often spoke most fondly about the friendships formed during those years. His teammates became lifelong friends and, in many respects, brothers. Those relationships endured throughout his life and reflected one of his defining qualities: an unwavering loyalty to the people who shared his journey.

In 1965, a basketball scholarship brought Fred to Florida Southern College in Lakeland. Years later, he would joke that for a young man from the coal-mining hills of West Virginia, being invited to attend college in Florida "was like being asked to go to heaven."

Florida Southern proved to be one of the most important chapters of his life. There he excelled as a student-athlete and campus leader, playing both basketball and baseball while serving as president of his sophomore, junior, and senior classes. He graduated cum laude in 1969 and received some of

the institution's highest honors, including selection as Florida Southern's Honor Walk Student, recognition through the Williams Memorial Outstanding Athlete Award, and national recognition through Sigma Alpha Epsilon's Besser-Lindsey Award. He was later inducted into the Florida Southern College Athletic Hall of Fame.

Most importantly, Florida Southern introduced him to Judy Munc.

Fred and Judy married in 1969 and built a partnership that would span more than fifty-seven years. Through every triumph, challenge, achievement, and disappointment, Judy remained his closest confidante, strongest supporter, and greatest blessing. Together they built a family grounded in love, faith, education, service, and devotion to one another.

Fred often acknowledged that none of his accomplishments would have been possible without Judy's extraordinary love, sacrifice, and support. Throughout his legal career, judicial service, and public life, she stood beside him with grace, strength, wisdom, and humility. While supporting Fred's demanding professional responsibilities, Judy also devoted herself tirelessly to caring for their daughter, Lindsay, whose special needs required constant advocacy, attention, and love. She carried those responsibilities with remarkable courage and selflessness, creating a home filled with compassion, stability, and encouragement. To those who knew them best, Fred's success was never his alone—it was a reflection of the partnership they built together and the steadfast support Judy provided every step of the way.

The Lewis family also shared a special love for their second home at Alligator Point. Some of Fred's happiest moments were spent on the deck overlooking the Gulf, surrounded by family, friends, and generations of loved ones. Whether watching the sunset, cheering on the Hurricanes, telling stories, or

simply enjoying quiet conversations with Judy, those days reflected what mattered most to him: family, friendship, gratitude, and time spent together.

Fred's accomplishments earned him an NCAA Postgraduate Scholarship to attend the University of Miami School of Law. There he once again distinguished himself academically, graduating cum laude in 1972 and finishing third in his law school class. He served on the University of Miami Law Review, competed in moot court, served as an officer in the Student Bar Association, and was inducted into Iron Arrow, the University's highest honor society.

His years at Miami also began a lifelong relationship with the University. He returned to the School of Law as an educator, teaching Florida Tort Law and mentoring future generations of lawyers. He followed every Hurricanes team with enthusiasm, but football held a special place in his heart. Fred proudly bled orange and green and celebrated some of his greatest sports memories during the University of Miami's remarkable run of four national football championships in the 1980s and 1990's. Whether attending games in the Orange Bowl, discussing recruiting classes with his friends, or cheering on the Hurricanes from afar, his loyalty to "The U" never wavered. Long after graduation, he remained one of the University's most passionate ambassadors and supporters.

Fred also proudly served his country. Following service as commander of the University of Miami ROTC Corps of Cadets, he attended the United States Army Adjutant General School, where he graduated first in his class and received the Order of World Wars Superior Achievement Honor.

The University of Miami years also brought friendships that would remain among the most important relationships of his adult life. During law school and the years that followed in private practice, Fred formed a close-knit circle of

friends and colleagues who shared not only a profession, but a lifelong bond. Just as his Beckley teammates had remained a constant presence from his youth, these friendships became an enduring source of fellowship, support, laughter, and counsel throughout his career. Through the decades, they celebrated one another's successes, supported one another through challenges, and remained deeply connected long after their law school days had passed.

While still a law student, Fred began working with legendary Miami appellate attorney Ed Perse. What started as a clerkship developed into one of the most influential relationships of his life. Perse became mentor, counselor, trusted advisor, and dear friend. Fred often remarked that until Ed's death, scarcely a day passed without seeking his counsel. Under Perse's guidance, Fred developed into one of Florida's most respected appellate lawyers and built a distinguished legal career characterized by integrity, preparation, professionalism, and exceptional advocacy.

The relationship extended well beyond the professional sphere. Fred also developed a close and lasting bond with Ed's daughter, Jeannine Perse Hagan, who became like a third daughter to him. The Perse family occupied a special place in his life, and the friendships formed through that relationship endured for decades.

Throughout his years in private practice, Fred devoted substantial time to service and pro bono work, particularly assisting families of children with disabilities and individuals facing serious illnesses. He also served on the Board of Directors of Miami Children's Hospital, reflecting a lifelong commitment to helping those facing adversity and ensuring that vulnerable individuals were treated with dignity and respect.

In December 1998, Governor Lawton Chiles appointed Fred Lewis as the 78th

Justice of the Florida Supreme Court. The appointment was historically significant both because Fred was widely regarded as the first justice appointed directly from private practice rather than from the bench and because it became one of Governor Chiles' final official acts before his death.

The appointment also marked the beginning of one of the most treasured friendships of Fred and Judy's adult lives. Through Governor Chiles and his administration, they developed a close relationship with Jen and Dan Stengle that would endure for decades. What began through public service evolved into a deep personal friendship built on mutual respect, shared values, and unwavering loyalty. Through life's celebrations and challenges alike, the Stengles remained among the Lewis family's closest friends.

Over the next two decades, including service as Chief Justice from 2006 to 2008, Justice Lewis earned a reputation for intellectual rigor, fairness, independence, and humanity. He believed deeply that courts existed to serve people and that justice should never depend upon wealth, influence, status, or circumstance. Lawyers respected his preparation and integrity. Court staff admired his kindness and accessibility. Citizens who met him often found it difficult to reconcile his humility with the prominence of his office. His years on the Court included participation in the historic litigation arising from the disputed 2000 presidential election, one of the most closely watched judicial proceedings in modern American history. Throughout that period and beyond, he remained committed to the principle that courts must decide cases based on the law, independent of politics or public pressure.

As Chief Justice, he championed initiatives designed to strengthen public confidence in the judicial system and expand access to justice. He directed a statewide effort to identify and eliminate barriers facing persons with disabilities in Florida courthouses. He established Florida's first statewide

diversity training program for judges, convened Florida's first all-branch summit addressing mental health issues within the justice system, and served for many years as liaison to the Florida Board of Bar Examiners, helping strengthen academic and character standards for admission to the legal profession.

He also poured countless hours into mentoring young lawyers and law clerks. Fred took time to learn about their families, aspirations, and lives beyond the law. He remained invested in their success long after they left his chambers, offering guidance, encouragement, and friendship throughout their careers. His influence continues through generations of lawyers who benefited from his wisdom and example.

Among all of his professional accomplishments, none brought him greater pride than Justice Teaching.

Fred believed that democracy depends upon informed citizens and that young people should understand the Constitution, the courts, and the rule of law. Through Justice Teaching, he helped build a statewide civic education initiative that connected thousands of volunteer judges and lawyers with students and educators throughout Florida's middle and high schools. Under his leadership, Justice Teaching became one of the nation's most successful judicial outreach programs, ultimately receiving the Sandra Day O'Connor Award for the Advancement of Civics Education.

Following his retirement from the Court in 2019, Fred returned to Florida Southern College as Eminent Professor of Law and Letters. In many ways, he returned to where his Florida journey had begun more than five decades earlier. He taught undergraduate students, mentored future leaders, and continued visiting schools throughout the state, sharing his lifelong passion for civic education, public service, and the Constitution.

Even after leaving the Court, Fred remained devoted to the mission. Justice Teaching ultimately found its permanent home at Florida Southern College through the Justice Teaching Center for Civic Learning, where he continued to serve as founder, teacher, mentor, and advocate for civic education. What began as one judge's effort to help students better understand their government became a lasting institution that will continue serving future generations.

Throughout his career, Justice Lewis received numerous honors recognizing both professional achievement and public service, including Florida Citizen of the Year, Florida Jurist of the Year, the William M. Hoeveler Judicial Award, and many other recognitions from legal, educational, civic, and community organizations.

For all of his accomplishments, family remained the center of Fred's life.

He was a devoted husband, father, grandfather, mentor, and friend. Nothing brought him greater pride than the people he loved.

Fred was especially devoted to his late daughter Lindsay. The experiences he and Judy shared in advocating for Lindsay throughout her life profoundly shaped their understanding of compassion, dignity, patience, and perseverance. Those who knew him best understood that many of the qualities that defined his service as a lawyer and justice were strengthened through his experiences as Lindsay's father. Her passing in 2012 was one of the deepest sorrows of his life, but her influence remained a constant source of inspiration and perspective.

He was equally proud of his daughter Elle, her accomplishments as a scholar-athlete, engineer, and leader, and the life she built with her husband, Clarke

Anderson. In his later years, few things brought Fred greater joy than spending time with his grandchildren, Ellison and Evans. He delighted in their accomplishments, encouraged their ambitions, and treasured every opportunity to be present in their lives.

Though he became Chief Justice of Florida and earned countless professional honors, Fred Lewis never stopped being the young man from Beckley who believed in hard work, loyalty, friendship, education, opportunity, and service. The lessons he learned in the coal fields of West Virginia informed every role he would later hold—as athlete, soldier, lawyer, justice, teacher, husband, father, grandfather, mentor, and friend. He carried Beckley with him always, and in doing so, never stopped being the boy shaped by its people and its values.

His legacy lives on in the judicial opinions he authored, the institutions he strengthened, the students he inspired, the lawyers he mentored, and the countless lives he touched through his kindness, humility, generosity, and unwavering belief in the dignity of every person. More importantly, it lives on in the example he set—a life of integrity, service, gratitude, compassion, and purpose.

Justice Lewis is survived by his beloved wife, Judy Lewis; daughter, Elle Anderson; son-in-law, Clarke Anderson; grandchildren, Ellison and Evans Anderson; and countless friends, former clerks, students, colleagues, educators, lawyers, and judges whose lives were enriched by his friendship, mentorship, wisdom, and example. He was preceded in death by his parents, William Fred Lewis and Dorothy B. Lewis, and by his cherished daughter, Lindsay Lewis.

Justice Lewis will lie in state in the Rotunda of the Florida Supreme Court from

11:00 a.m. until 1:00 p.m. on Thursday, June 11, 2026. A memorial service celebrating his life and legacy will be held in the courtroom of the Florida Supreme Court at 11:00 a.m. on Friday, June 12, 2026. The service will be live streamed via Gavel to Gavel (<https://wfsu.org/gavel2gavel/>), The Florida Channel (<https://thefloridachannel.org/>) or Florida Supreme Court (<https://www.youtube.com/c/FloridaSupremeCourtTallahassee>). The Florida Channel is aired on cable systems throughout Florida and is available as a Roku channel.

In lieu of flowers, food deliveries, or other gifts, the Lewis family kindly requests that those wishing to honor Justice Lewis consider making a memorial contribution to the University of Miami School of Law (<https://ucare.miami.edu/in-memory-of-honorable-r-fred-lewis>) or Florida Southern College (<https://www.flsouthern.edu/giving>). (Please select “In Memory of Justice Fred Lewis” from the “Area of Giving” dropdown menu.) These institutions played transformative roles in his life and remained deeply important to him throughout his career and public service.

The Lewis family is grateful for the many expressions of friendship, support, remembrance, and love received during this difficult time.

Rocky Bevis and the staff of Bevis Funeral Home (850-385-2193 or www.bevisfh.com) are assisting the Lewis family with their arrangements.

Upcoming Events

Lie in State

JUN 11. 11:00 AM - 1:00 PM (ET)

Florida Supreme Court Rotunda
500 South Duval Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Memorial Service

JUN 12. 11:00 AM (ET)

Florida Supreme Court
500 South Duval Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Tribute Wall

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“ *judy and family, my thoughts are with you. fred was a lasting example for me since beginning the practice of law in miami in 1973. most importantly he provided a path as to how to proceed in our profession with professionalism....even when he sat at the other table representing a client adverse to mine. i benefitted in so many ways from his manner and motivation through the years. thank you for sharing him for so long in so many important ways. buddy schulz*

buddy schulz - 43 minutes ago