Abner Mikva, ’51, Law School Clinical Faculty Member, 1926–2016

Abner Mikva, ’51, one of the few Americans to serve in senior positions in all three branches of the federal government, passed away on July 4, 2016. He was 90. Mikva taught courses in legislative process at the University of Chicago Law School for many years and served as Senior Director and Director of the Appellate Advocacy Project at the Mandel Legal Aid Clinic.

“Abner Mikva was the Law School graduate who clearly embodied public service,” said Thomas J. Miles, Dean of the University of Chicago Law School. “Through his work in government and his teaching at the Law School, he encouraged younger people to join him in his important and honorable work. His legacy will inspire future generations of Law School graduates to make our government and laws better.”

A native of Wisconsin, Mikva graduated from Washington University at St. Louis and served with the Army Air Corps in World War II. He graduated from the University of Chicago Law School in 1951, where he served as Editor in Chief of the University of Chicago Law Review. Mikva clerked for Justice Sherman Minton of the United States Supreme Court, then practiced law with the firm that would later become known as Goldberg, Devoe, Shadur & Mikva.

In 1956, Mikva began his life of public service by winning election to the Illinois House as a Democrat. In Springfield, he fought for fair housing and against corruption in the state welfare system, helping to reform both the Illinois criminal code and the state’s mental health facilities. He was first elected to the United States House of Representatives in 1969 and served eight years from two different districts, including Hyde Park.

President Jimmy Carter nominated Mikva for the federal appeals court in the District of Columbia in 1979. Mikva served on the DC Circuit for sixteen years, of which the last three were as Chief Judge. He authored more than 300 judicial opinions.

Judge Mikva left the bench in 1994 at the request of President Bill Clinton, who appointed him to the position of White House Counsel. He served two years before moving back to Chicago to start the first of his many retirements.

It was then that Mikva first began to teach at the Law School. “It was such a memorable experience having Judge Mikva for Legislative Process,” said Adam Bonin, ’97, one of Mikva’s first students in the course and now an election law attorney in Philadelphia. “There’s no substitute for the real-world experience he had. The stories he told were amazing, and he was always so generous with his time.”

Mikva was appointed Senior Director of the Law School’s Mandel Legal Aid Clinic by Dean Saul Levmore, and he headed the Clinic’s Appellate Advocacy Project. His clinic took on only the most difficult appellate cases, and Mikva pushed his students to find questions worthy of appeal.

“Ab Mikva was a role model for us,” said Levmore, now William B. Graham Distinguished Service Professor of Law. “He was an original social justice warrior, always on the lookout for causes and for things that did not feel right. He had an excellent sense of the power and limits of the judiciary and of politicians, and made the most of his own experience in these sectors. Every time I sent a student to him with an idea, the student emerged inspired and determined to pursue the project in question. I think it was Ab’s energy and enthusiasm that propelled those around him.”

While at the Law School, Mikva befriended and mentored a young lecturer named Barack Obama. In November 2014, Mikva’s protégé bestowed upon Mikva the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor. He called it the “greatest thing that ever happened to me.”

In 1997, Mikva and his wife, Zoe, started the nonprofit Mikva Challenge, a civic leadership program for young people which encourages them to get involved in political issues and campaigns. In 2014, in honor of Mikva’s long career in public service, the Kanter Family Foundation established the Mikva Fellowship Program Fund at the Law School to support a one-year postgraduate public interest law fellowship.

“He was smart as a whip, generous of spirit, and dedicated to the public good,” said Geoffrey Stone, ’71, Edward H. Levi Distinguished Service Professor of Law. “Our nation needs more leaders like him.”

In addition to his wife Zoe, Mikva is survived by three daughters (Mary and Laurie Mikva and Rachel Mikva Rosenberg) and seven grandchildren.