

Tribute: Austin F. Shute, always a champion of the underdog

By JAMES HART , The Kansas City Star

Who: Austin F. Shute, 81, a Kansas City defense attorney who represented Black Panthers, “one-percenter” motorcycle clubs, hippies and other unusual clients. He also helped push the Kansas City Metropolitan Bar Association to accept black attorneys.

When and how he died: Jan. 31 of congestive heart failure.

For the underdog: Shute was “always for the underdogs, always,” his wife, Judy, said. In the 1970s, he provided free legal services to the Black Panthers in Kansas City, including leader Pete O’Neal, who later fled to Tanzania to avoid a federal gun charge. (O’Neal once showed up on Shute’s doorstep with a pet boa constrictor.)

Though many people feared them, the Panthers also operated school breakfast programs and neighborhood clinics, Shute once told an interviewer. He made them promise to refrain from violence if he was going to represent them.

He never turned away a client simply because they couldn’t pay.

“You see, lawyers can do good if they want to,” Shute said in an interview with *K.C. Counselor*. “They can have a positive effect on society, and there’s so much that needs to be done.”



Salty but caring: Shute was raised in Pigeon Cove, Mass., the sixth of eight children. By age 12, he was going out to sea on commercial fishing vessels. When World War II began, he enlisted in the Navy and served as a signalman in the Pacific. After the war, he hitchhiked to Columbia, where he planned to attend journalism school — but ended up pursuing a law degree instead.

Shute could be very direct, his family said, so much so that people might be taken off-guard.

“He came off as gruff and mean as he could possibly be,” Judy Shute said, but anyone who spent 10 minutes talking with him would realize that he was a very caring person.

Marriage and travel: Austin and Judy, who were married for 37 years, met on a blind date. One of Judy’s friends worked for Austin’s firm, and she set them up.

The two of them traveled extensively during their marriage. Tahiti was a favorite vacation, as was Siesta Key, Fla., where they vacationed twice a year. They liked going for long walks on the beach and trying to

see who would be the first to find a shark's tooth. Judy didn't learn until later that Austin carried around a pocketful of them.

A long career: Until heart trouble forced him to quit working at 75, he played handball every day for several years.

A couple of years ago, one of Shute's sons-in-law, Joe Dimino, set up a Web site, www.austinchute.com. The site collects old press clippings, photographs, short stories and an interview Shute recorded. It's still active today.

Survivors include: His wife, six children, 11 grandchildren, two great-grandchildren, one brother.

The last word: Shute wrote his own obituary. He described himself as "never a great lawyer, but always a good one." His wife disagreed.

"He was kind of modest," Judy Shute said, "but he was an excellent lawyer."