

Biography:

Grant Howell was born in Hamilton on December 9, 1926. He came from United Empire Loyalist (UEL) roots; the family name is on the UEL statue in front of the old courthouse on Main Street in Hamilton. Grant attended Hillfield School and Westdale Secondary School. He graduated with a BA from McMaster University. In 1948 he was admitted to Osgoode Hall Law School together with fellow Hamiltonians and friends Paul Philp¹ and John Bowlby².

He was called to the Bar in 1951 and shortly thereafter joined the Ross & Robinson law firm. For almost 40 years he practised with his brother Ross in partnership as Howell and Howell, first at a walk-up on Hughson Street with the firm name on the window in gold script, and then later in Terminal Towers (now Effort Square). Upon Ross's untimely death in 1991, Grant joined Simpson, Wigle where he practised until his retirement in 2004.

Grant was appointed Queen's Counsel in 1968 and was President of the Hamilton Law Association in 1973–74.

Most of his clients were ordinary people who needed a good lawyer. For many, he was there from first home purchase to closing their estate. His clients also included the Hamilton Region Conservation Authority, the Law Society of Upper Canada and faculty departments of McMaster University. Grant acted as Commission Counsel into inquiries into the City of Hamilton Assessment Department and the inquiry into marble falling from Hamilton City Hall. The need for the marble inquiry became acute when a falling marble slab narrowly missed Anne Jones, the Chair of the Hamilton Region at the time.

Grant and his brother Ross had a reputation in Hamilton as strong and ethical advocates and decent and honourable men. They weren't afraid to take risks either, especially if they thought a greater principle was at stake. In the early years of their partnership, in what ended up being one of the last capital punishment cases, the brothers took a stand against the death penalty. Their client, a man found guilty of having murdered his spouse, was sentenced to death. Grant and Ross believed that capital punishment was wrong and took extraordinary steps to intervene. They sent the Minister of Justice a petition from a majority of the jurors, and the Minister commuted the sentence to life.

Grant's kindness was shared with all who had the good fortune to know him. When a female client was sentenced to prison for solicitation, Grant accompanied her by bus to Barton Street Jail when she had to begin to serve her sentence. She had no one else.

Grant was remembered by colleagues upon his death in 2018:

(Grant was) the archetype for the right way to conduct oneself as a lawyer - engaged, professional, courteous, diligent and honorable. He set a standard of which all of us are proud and to which we as colleagues should aspire. - Dermot Nolan

¹ Later an HLA Member, partner of Evans Philp, Bencher of the Law Society of Upper Canada, Justice of the Supreme Court of Ontario (now the Superior Court of Justice)

² Later an HLA Member, partner of Griffin, Parker Weatherston (and its successors), Bencher and Treasurer of Law Society of Upper Canada, Justice of the Supreme Court of Ontario (now the Superior Court of Justice)

Grant was an exceptional man, gracious, warm and so decent – but crossing him in a dispute was not likely to come out well...A man who articulated principled positions and with some tenacity – and with occasionally frustrating charm, wit and good grace. - John F. Evans QC, LSM

(He)was one of the really good guys who made us all proud to be lawyers. - Michael Valente

Grant also contributed to the broader Hamilton community throughout his career. He served on the Board of Education, was the founding chair of the Hamilton Region Conservation Foundation and participated as a board member of the Hamilton Program for Schizophrenia, Crime Stoppers and the SPCA. After he retired in his late 70s Grant wanted to spend his time doing something meaningful but wasn't interested in more board work. He loved volunteering at Bennetto School in the north end reading to grade one kids. Grant was sometimes the subject of school projects there and the unselfconscious inquiry of the students. "What did you do for a living, Mr. Howell," they'd ask. "Did you make a lot of money?"

Early in his career Grant sought out Lester Pearson when he was running for Prime Minister and staying at the Royal Connaught Hotel. Grant cooked up an idea to get Mr. Pearson some press. He knew that Pearson was a decent basketball player and that a group of boys played every weekend in the gym at the Wesley Methodist church where Mr. Pearson's father had been the Minister. Grant showed up at Mr. Pearson's hotel room with a photo opportunity he couldn't refuse. Pearson went for it, and Dad called a reporter to watch the future Prime Minister shooting hoops with some inner-city lads. The result was a photo in Time Magazine and an invitation to join Mr. Pearson's entourage. After a short stint on the campaign trail, Grant opted to return home to his family and practice.

Grant remained a Liberal for most of his life, but only became actively involved again in politics when he chose to run for Parliament under the Progressive Conservative banner of Joe Clark in 2000. He didn't win but he did get a sizable number of votes in Stoney Creek where his mother was born. He loved running for office and the chance to meet so many people. Most of all, he appreciated the opportunity to participate in the democratic process.

In the 1970s Grant purchased and began operating a farm on the Stoney Creek mountain, immediately beside the one-room schoolhouse his mother Irene Howell (nee Freel) had attended. From his home in Hamilton he actively farmed 89 acres plus rented land and regularly had a herd of up to 100 beef cattle. Grant frequently sold sides of A-1 beef to lawyers and other friends and associates in the Hamilton community. He was considered somewhat eccentric in the farming community for feeding his cattle hormone-free feed, a rarity at the time. In fact, Grant was probably the original organic farmer before the term was even invented. He raised pigs for a short time too, immortalized in his "Howell's Hams" sweatshirt, a gift from his friends George³ and Mary Ann Simpson.

Grant was married to Pat for almost 62 years and together they had five children.

Julia Howell
David Howell (HLA member)
(two of Grant's children)

³ A founding partner of SimpsonWigle LAW LLP