

The Honorable U.S. District Court Judge Sam Sparks (1939 – 2025)

Sam Sparks, Senior United States District Judge for the Austin Division of the Western District of Texas, died on September 17, 2025, at age 85, leaving behind a legacy shaped by service, fairness, intellectual rigor, and heartfelt commitment to mentoring the next generation of lawyers.

Judge Sparks was born in Austin on September 27, 1939, and remained deeply rooted in Texas and the University of Texas throughout his life. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in Plan II Honors in 1961 from the University of Texas, where he was a Texas Cowboy and a member of Delta Tau fraternity, and an LL.B. in 1963 from the University of Texas School of Law. Throughout his lifetime, he remained an ardent supporter and alumnus. After clerking for Judge Homer Thornberry, he spent over two decades in private practice in El Paso, trying hundreds of cases to verdict and building a reputation as a top trial lawyer. He was board-certified in both civil and personal injury litigation and was inducted into the prestigious American College of Trial Lawyers.

President George H. W. Bush nominated him in 1991 to a newly created seat on the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Texas. Judge Sparks was confirmed by unanimous vote of the Senate in November of that year with support of both Republican Sen. Phil Gramm and Democratic Sen. Lloyd Bentsen. He assumed senior status on December 31, 2017. Over his more than three decades on the bench, Judge Sparks presided over some of Texas's most consequential and widely watched matters. He will be remembered not only for those rulings, but also for how he reached them—with principle and precision.

Among his notable judicial contributions, Judge Sparks ruled on important cases relating to admissions at The University of Texas, conditions for detained immigrants, digital property rights, accountability of public leaders, and other high-profile matters. Regardless of the size of a matter, Judge Sparks treated each case and each litigant with utmost fairness under the law. He was a devout advocate of the jury trial, taking time to talk to and thank each juror who served. Judge Sparks also handled each matter on his criminal docket with full focus and attention on the details to strive toward justice.

In recognition of his judicial independence, integrity, and dedication to the rule of law, Judge Sparks was honored in 2010 with the Sandra Day O'Connor Jurist Award by the American College of Trial Lawyers. He was only the second recipient of this award, which is reserved for judges who have demonstrated extraordinary courage and independence in their service.

But for all his accomplishments in the courtroom, many who knew him say his greatest legacy will be the countless lawyers and law clerks he nurtured. He took mentoring seriously, treating each young attorney with the expectation of excellence, and generations of attorneys in Austin and elsewhere still recount lessons learned from Judge Sparks. He will also be remembered for his quick wit, sense of humor, poetic orders, and droll sayings, often involving mixed metaphors.

Judge Sparks's personal life was marked by both love and loss. He married Arden Reed in 1962. They moved to El Paso and raised four sons together until Arden's untimely death from cancer in 1990. He moved back to Austin in 1991. In 1995, he married Melinda Echols of Fort Worth, who died in 2021 after her own battle with cancer. He leaves behind six children and

stepchildren, nine grandchildren, five great-grandchildren, his sister Sandra Sparks, his sister-in-law Sadi Sparks, and numerous other friends and family.

Judge Sparks was laid to rest on September 26, 2025 in a small private ceremony at the Texas State Cemetery. He will be deeply missed for his fairness, high standards, mentorship, friendship, and generosity.