

In Memoriam

Zita Weinshienk

April 3, 1933–October 7, 2022



The Honorable Zita Weinshienk passed away peacefully at home surrounded by her family on October 7, 2022. She was 89.

Born Zita Kay Leeson on April 3, 1933, in St. Paul, Minnesota, to Ada Dubov Leeson and Louis Leeson, Zita moved west with her family in 1945 to find a healthier environment for her younger brother with asthma. They settled in Tucson, Arizona, where they opened a furniture upholstery business and welcomed her second brother into the family.

Zita attended the University of Colorado from 1952 until 1954. To save up for graduate school, she returned to Arizona to complete her senior year and graduated from the University

of Arizona in 1955. She decided on a career in law and in the fall of 1955 became one of the few women to be admitted to Harvard Law School, which had begun admitting women only two years prior. Zita's friend from CU, Hubert Weinshienk, was in her class at Harvard, and they were married during their second year. Zita graduated from Harvard Law School, cum laude, in 1958. She attended the University of Copenhagen on a Fulbright Scholarship the following year.

Zita returned to Colorado to begin her legal career and ranked number one on the Colorado bar exam. Her first job as a lawyer was as probation counselor, legal advisor, and referee for the Denver Juvenile Court. In 1964, Zita became Denver's first female jurist when she was appointed to the Denver Municipal Court. A year later, she became a Denver County Court judge, where she served until 1972, when she was appointed as a Denver District Court

judge. On October 10, 1979, Zita became the first woman to serve as a judge for the US District Court for the District of Colorado when she was appointed by President Jimmy Carter. In 1998, Zita became a senior US District Court judge. She retired in 2011 at age 77.


Zita was committed to inspiring women and people of color to pursue careers in law. She was very proud to have her legacy carried on by her granddaughter Samara Hoose, who is an attorney in Denver, and by her stepdaughter Monica Haenselman, who is a district court magistrate in Boulder. Of the numerous accolades and awards Zita received during her 47-year tenure on the bench, she was particularly honored to have been inducted into the Colorado Women's Hall of Fame in 2000.

Zita had a remarkable career, and her life was marked not only by her brilliance as a jurist, but also by her love of her family. She had three daughters with her husband Hugh, who passed away in 1983. She later married Jim Schaffner and welcomed Jim's children into her family.

Zita loved to travel and had a deep appreciation of nature. She was an avid skier, hiker, and birdwatcher. She spent many happy years skiing and hiking in the Colorado mountains. After Jim's death in 2010, Zita moved to California to be closer to her daughters. She enjoyed the final years of her life living with her grandchildren Oscar and Bar Olesker and their three children, with many other family members close by.

Zita is survived by her daughters Ita (Edie) Weinshienk Olesker (David), Kay Weinshienk, and Darcy Weinshienk; her four stepchildren; her 19 grandchildren; and her 20 great-grandchildren. She was preceded in death by her parents Ada and Louis Leeson, her brothers Alan Leeson and Michael Leeson, her first husband Hubert Weinshienk, and her second husband James Schaffner.

Zita was a genuine trailblazer. She was determined, thoughtful, generous, and kind. She was beloved by her staff, her friends, and her family. She will be greatly missed.

Donations in her honor may be made to The Nature Conservancy, <https://www.nature.org>, 4245 North Fairfax Drive, Suite 100, Arlington, Virginia 22203-1606. 



Judge Zita Weinshienk (seated, far right) with Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and fellow Colorado jurists at a Colorado Women's Bar Association gathering in 1994. Photo courtesy of CWBA.