



## Mervin C. Lernhart

September 21, 1936 - August 15, 2024

Mervin Conrad Lernhart, 87, passed away in Napa, on August 15, 2024, with his loving family by his side.

Mervin was born in Napa on September 21, 1936, to Margaret (Slater) and Napa Superior Court Judge Mervin C. Lernhart.

The descendant of California pioneers, Mervin's ancestors were German and Irish immigrants who came west during the gold rush, ultimately settling in Napa in the early 1850s.

Mervin grew up on Wilson Street in old town Napa. He loved to draw, and at an early age displayed a remarkable talent as a cartoonist. He was a self-directed learner who loved books. Growing up an only child, Mervin's favorite place to be was at his grandmother's house on Second Street. He often told stories of his Nona's Sunday leg of lamb dinners, complete with apple pie and a few tipsy relatives entertaining the family with Irish songs.

Mervin attended St. John's Catholic School, during which time he served as an altar boy. In his early teens, Mervin enjoyed yearly Boy Scout camping trips to Yosemite National Park. He never forgot one embarrassing day his mother drove to the park just to bring him a bottle of cough syrup. He received a memorable razzing from the other scouts over the incident.

He graduated from Napa High where he was a star Football player and a popular student. However, he did find himself in a bit of mischief at times.

Mervin's first marriage was to his high school sweetheart, Marie Greco. They were married for seventeen years and had four children. He enjoyed the Italian flavor Marie's family brought to his life, especially the food.

After attending Napa Community College, he transferred to the University of Nevada, Reno, to study Civil Engineering. His paternal uncle had been a design engineer on many California bridges. During the time he studied engineering, Mervin was proud to have worked on several projects in Napa, including the design of the Lincoln Street Bridge, and surveying the new roads to Lake Berryessa.

After the sudden death of his father during his senior year at UNR, he abruptly changed his career path. He gave up engineering and graduated from University of California Hastings.

After passing the Bar Exam, he began his legal career. By 1968, he was the Planning Commission Legal Adviser at the Napa County Counsel's Office. When a lawsuit was filed to have the Ag Preserve declared unconstitutional, he joined the fight to prevent the land in Napa County from being converted for urban uses, rather than agricultural. There was significant opposition to requiring the land to only be sold or passed down to family in 20 or 40 acre lot sizes. They won at trial, and Mervin then drafted the legislation that would create the first Agricultural Preserve in America. Mervin believed that the legislation benefited the owners, the County and the State. He always said that he felt especially proud of his participation resulting in the success of the Ag Preserve.

Several years later, he opened his own successful private practice.

Mervin enjoyed water skiing on Lake Berryessa, time with his sons, backpacking in the High Sierra, fishing trips, and adventures, always bringing along his beloved dog Boris. After his divorce, Mervin lived across from Fuller Park in a grand old house just blocks from where he grew up. It was there that his love of cooking and cookbooks flourished. Mervin made family favorites like hot pasta and many Italian foods, Indian foods and delicious family feasts, including his famous park beans with ham and potato salad. Whatever he cooked was on level with fine dining in Napa Valley. He was an excellent chef and loved cooking. He also loved recreating his grandmother's Sunday dinners. He enjoyed weekend visits with his sons, running in the park with his dog, and being a bachelor about town. It was during this time that he met his second wife, Barbara.

They fell in love and were married. Barbara and Mervin became life and career partners. He had found a new home and three step-children, followed by grandchildren, who lovingly called him "Papa" or "Pops".

In addition to joining their families together, Mervin and Barbara combined their professional skills to become a respected and successful husband and wife legal team.

Mervin was a highly respected criminal defense attorney, trying over 30 high-profile murder cases during his career. In addition to his private practice, he also served as the Napa County Conflict Public Defender from 1986-2006. He then became the Administrator of the formation of The Jefferson Law Center, consisting of highly qualified defense attorneys contracting with Napa County to represent indigent defendants when there is a conflict in the Public Defenders Office.

In 1988-1989, Mervin collaborated with fellow criminal Defense Attorney and friend, Jim Wagner, to improve the below standard conditions at the Napa County Jail. The Napa County Department of Corrections was remodeled and expanded in 1989. He then realized that the female inmates were not afforded the same Work Furlough opportunities as the male inmates, and worked to have a trailer installed in the parking lot of the jail to be used for Women's Work Furlough.

He changed the course of countless lives in his role as a dedicated defense attorney. After more than half a century of practicing law, Mervin retired in 2021, at the age of 84. Although he thought of himself as a "Country Lawyer", many thought of him as "The Legend".

During his career, Mervin became a staple at many establishments in Downtown Napa, most notably, Henry's. He could often be found there with friends and colleagues having "one final, final" after the courts had closed. He formed many cherished friendships and relationships within Napa's legal community and enjoyed longtime Napa friends and acquaintances.

During retirement, he enjoyed being with the love of his life, Barbara, his books, more books, and even more books. Last count there were somewhere around 2,000 books on shelves throughout their home. Thank goodness for his Kindle. His granddaughter began organizing a "library" for him this summer when she read that 1,000 books constitutes an official home library. He may have left too soon to enjoy his new room, but she will put the sign on the door: "Papa's Library".

He loved watching History, Nature, and documentary programming on television. They both enjoyed reading and practicing Stoicism. Mervin loved being Irish and everything Irish.

He and Barbara spent many happy years at home with their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren; hosting holiday dinners, and escaping to San Francisco, Bodega Bay or Monte Rio to relax together.

Mervin spent his golden days in his favorite easy chair, surrounded by piles of books, his dog asleep at his feet, and his beloved wife Barbara by his side, comfortable and content in the knowledge of a life well lived.

Mervin was preceded in death by his son, Mervin Joseph Lernhart and his daughter, Katherine Ann Lernhart. Surviving are his wife, Barbara Lernhart; 5 children: Matthew and Michael Lernhart (Rose Martin), Vikki Appleyard (Ryan), Juli Polidori (Dennis), and Phillip Stoddard; 6 grandchildren: Kathy Briggs (Marshall), Michelle Lernhart, Zach Sleeper (Dominque), Sophie and Lidia Polidori, and Jordin Stoddard; 6 great-grandchildren: Cooper and Kalynn Loftis, Morgan Briggs, Daxton and Zander Sleeper; and Lorde Jonathan Lernhart.

A Funeral mass was held on August 22, 2024, at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Napa. A reception followed at Allegria Restaurant. The family wishes to apologize to those who did not receive timely information regarding the service.

A private family Interment will be at Tulocay Cemetery later this month.

His family are all grateful for your kind thoughts and prayers.

# Previous Events

## Mass

AUG **22**. 1:00 PM - 2:00 PM (PT)

St. John the Baptist Catholic Church  
981 Napa St.  
Napa, CA 94559  
(707) 226-9379  
<http://www.stjb1858.com/>

## Reception

AUG **22**. 2:15 PM - 4:15 PM (PT)

Ristorante Allegria  
1026 1st St  
Napa, CA 94559  
<https://www.ristoranteallegria.com/>

# Tribute Wall

JA

“ God bless you Merv. Just found out about your passing. Thank you so much for all you did for me over the years. You will be missed. God bless your family and friends at this time.  
Joseph Aldridge



joseph aldrige - August 24, 2024 at 05:20 AM

LO

“ So many many great memories to share about this great man and legal pioneer, rest in peace my good friend know that you will be missed 💙

Lisa O'Brien - August 23, 2024 at 12:53 PM

JB

“ Jason B. planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Mervin C. Lernhart.

Jason B. - August 22, 2024 at 10:40 PM



“ Florist Choice Bouquet was purchased for the family of Mervin C. Lernhart.



August 22, 2024 at 10:45 AM

VG

“ Vince & Linda Ghiringhelli purchased the Peaceful White Lilies Basket for the family of Mervin C. Lernhart.



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**Vince & Linda Ghiringhelli** - August 22, 2024 at 10:05 AM

LP

“ Lee P. planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Mervin C. Lernhart.

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**Lee P.** - August 22, 2024 at 09:14 AM

TR

“ I have so many memories of Merv and the office, as wells as his lovely wife and family. Sheesh, running to court with a document while he was in trial on a murder case and getting to see him in action! Typing while he paced back and forth behind me with his thoughts creating free hand motions (this was rare, as Barbara his beautiful wife and right hand would normally do this). His palm pilot. There are so many more, but the most special was being taken to lunch on my birthday one year, with Michael, Gay and Patrick. We began at Jonesy’s for lunch and some old fashions – It was determined that we were having so much fun, he shut the office down for the rest of the day! We proceeded to Henry’s where I was introduced to my first Green Lizard! Here I thought it was some minty tasting liquor. Patty said just drink it down, and so I did. Wow – I was breathing fire! From there, we had Sushi Mambo and I was escorted to my front door, long after work ended – and staggered in to my surprise party 2 hours late. I felt on top of the world that day. I am proud to have worked for a true legend and that experience I received intrigued me to maintaining my career in the legal field. You will be missed Merv, but I do talk about you often. A true legend. RIP -  
Sincerely, Tina Ybarra (Rodriguez)

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**Tina Rodriguez** - August 21, 2024 at 03:27 PM

BB

“ Barbara Burke purchased the Beautiful in Blue for the family of Mervin C. Lernhart.



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**Barbara Burke** - August 20, 2024 at 08:05 PM

MS

“ Matthew Bishop and Staff planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Mervin C. Lernhart.

Matthew Bishop and Staff - August 20, 2024 at 12:18 PM



“ Divine Peace Bouquet was purchased for the family of Mervin C. Lernhart.



August 20, 2024 at 12:18 PM



“ Beautiful Dreams was purchased for the family of Mervin C. Lernhart.



August 19, 2024 at 05:18 PM

ZF

“ Zizzo Family planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Mervin C. Lernhart.

Zizzo Family - August 19, 2024 at 05:18 PM

LS

“ Laurie S. planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Mervin C. Lernhart.

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**Laurie S.** - August 19, 2024 at 02:13 PM