

**John Kirkwood White; D.C. Lawyer, Activist**  
Network NewsX Profile

By Patricia Sullivan  
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Saturday, April 29, 2006

John Kirkwood “Kirk” White, 68, a well-known Washington city planner who started and ended his legal career as an attorney for the poor, died of sepsis April 27 at Memorial Hospital at Easton, Md. He lived in Cambridge, Md.

Mr. White, who identified himself as “a reformer,” picketed for District home rule on his lunch hour at his first job, as a Treasury Department lawyer. He later defended juveniles accused of looting during the city’s 1968 riots and then worked on the staff of D.C. Council Vice Chairman Sterling Tucker. He was a respected and hardworking mainstay of the old Metropolitan Planning Office in the late 1970s.

“I wanted to get into the city government because it was beginning to get into the problems of the eastern part of the city and into the problems of poverty,” Mr. White told The Washington Post in 1978.

“I really can’t describe how much fun it’s been to do what you’re interested in for your own city.”

Born in the affluent Chevy Chase section of the District, Mr. White developed an interest in the poor while working as a construction laborer during summer vacations from St. Albans School and Williams College in Massachusetts. He received a law degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1963.

He started working for the Treasury Department two days after President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. While there, he began volunteering for Neighborhood Legal Services in Anacostia, and by 1967, he had left government work to join the federally funded poverty program full time. He worked briefly for George Washington University’s Urban Legal Institute and in 1971 joined Tucker’s staff.

In 1975, Mr. White became the city’s zoning and planning coordinator. In that job, he redesigned the zoning application process and advised the D.C. Council on planning and development matters.

When he left to go into private practice in 1978, he told a Post reporter that he was most proud of “getting city attention focused on neighborhoods that had been ignored, like Anacostia. People have regarded Washington as a kind of sick dog,” he said, laughing. “But it’s a very healthy city that’s seen a resurgence of interest.”

Mr. White worked for a succession of law firms (Linowes and Blocker until 1987, Jones Day for three years, and Dunnells, Duvall and Porter until 1993). Then “he just got to the stage where he decided to do something completely different,” said his brother, Christopher Sherwood White of Chevy Chase in Maryland. Mr. White rejoined Neighborhood Legal Services, managing its Northeast Washington office until he had a severe stroke in late 1994. He recovered, but “he decided he couldn’t work with the intensity you need to be a trial lawyer, so he essentially retired,” his brother said.

He was a member of the Committee of 100 on the Federal City; sang in several church choirs, including that of the Church of the Epiphany in Washington; and enjoyed sailing on the Chesapeake Bay.

A prolific writer of letters to the editor on subjects from opera to the city’s financial crisis in the 1990s, Mr. White also wrote an amusing 300-word piece for The Post’s Style section in 1995 about being the only man in a water aerobics class.

“The second discovery I have made is that women talk, animatedly, and look at each other when they exercise. Men don’t,” he wrote. “The other things I have learned during my class is not to plant basil before June 15, which olive oil is good in a bean casserole, pointers from the Beardstown Ladies’ Investment club, and the best version of the Brahms Requiem (the Dresden Knaben Choir). . . . In fact, I’m expanding my horizons and having so much fun that I’m considering joining a dance class. Then, on to the Junior League. I’ve heard they know a lot about local politics.”

His marriage to Ann Bolbach ended in divorce.

In addition to his brother, survivors include his wife, Karen Belgin White of Cambridge; two sons from his first marriage, the Rev. Mark David White of Washington and Benjamin John White of New York; a stepdaughter, Maria T. Sterrett of Cambridge; a stepson, Timothy O. Sterrett of Sterling; a sister, Anne White Cooper of Washington; and two grandchildren.