



United States Courts for the Ninth Circuit

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Obituary

December 18, 2025

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Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals Mourns Passing of Judge Sandra Segal Ikuta

Senior Circuit Judge Sandra Segal Ikuta passed away Sunday, December 7, after a long-fought battle with pancreatic cancer. She was 71, born June 24, 1954. Her career path includes an appointment as deputy secretary and general counsel of the California Resources Agency by California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2004 and service as a partner at O'Melveny & Myers LLP in Los Angeles. She also served as a law clerk for U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, 1989-90, and former Chief Judge Alex Kozinski of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, 1988-89. Judge Ikuta was nominated by George W. Bush to a seat vacated by Chief Judge Emeritus James R. Browning and confirmed by the U.S. Senate on June 19, 2006. She just recently took senior status on Nov. 7, 2025.

“Judge Ikuta served with distinction during her long tenure on our court. She exemplified a tireless dedication to the rule of law, to collegiality, and to excellence in public service. Through her legendary work ethic, analytical rigor, and commitment to the court as an institution, Judge Ikuta deeply influenced our work and imbued the public with confidence in our administration of justice. She will be sorely missed by me and all who knew her,” said Chief Circuit Judge Mary H. Murguia.

“Her intelligence, knowledge, kindness, and fairness illuminated her relationships and decisions. All of that made her the wonderful judge, friend, and colleague that we all knew her to be,” said Senior Circuit Judge Ferdinand F. Fernandez.

Her education includes an undergraduate degree in literature from the University of California at Berkeley and a Master of Science from Columbia University School of Journalism. This trajectory led to becoming the first female editor-in-chief of a national martial arts magazine, “Inside Kung Fu,” where she met her husband Ed, a photographer. She continued her education at the UCLA School of Law, earning her J.D., Order of the Coif, in 1988 and was later awarded

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their prestigious Public and Community Service Award in 2011. Additionally, in 2011, Judge Ikuta was one of two recipients who received the Alumni of the Year Award. Taken together, these two awards are noted to exemplify the mission of UCLA Law.

Profiled in two Daily Journal articles (2009, 2018), her career highlights major cases such as Gonzalez v. Arizona, a major election law case at the time, in which Judge Ikuta authored an opinion striking down part of an Arizona law requiring voters to show proof of citizenship to register to vote as being inconsistent with certain provisions of federal law. Her opinion was joined by her former boss and mentor, Justice O'Connor—and the panel decision was later upheld en banc. Her other well-known cases, including Dukes v. Wal-Mart are given prominence in a recent Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy: Per Curiam fall 2025 article, “Tribute to Judge Sandra Ikuta,” written by her successor on the bench, Circuit Judge Eric C. Tung. This article garners special attention as it is rare for an incoming circuit judge to illuminate another’s gifts to the court with such consideration and measured attention to both her professional accomplishments and personal life.

Upon hearing the news of Judge Ikuta’s passing, Judge Tung shared, “This court has suffered a great loss with the passing of Judge Sandra Ikuta. She is irreplaceable and will stand among the pantheon of greats in the history of our federal judiciary. One who kept the faith in our Constitution to the end, Judge Ikuta will remain for me a fixed star. May she rest in peace.”

In her own words, Judge Ikuta shared more about Wal-Mart v. Dukes in a Daily Journal profile in 2018 by Nicolas Sonnenburg. As the Supreme Court “largely adopted the framework of Ikuta’s dissent” she described the feeling as, “pretty amazing,” when interviewed by Sonnenburg. She provided a truly memorable quote. “My law clerk who had been working with me on that case said, ‘Yesterday I understood your dissent, and today I understand the law of the land.’”

Although no law clerk took credit for the quote, all who were contacted unanimously agreed on its verity wholeheartedly.

Former law clerk, Annie H. Lee, shared a fond memory when fellow law clerk, David Schwartz and her accompanied Judge Ikuta and her family as they drove together for a sitting with her two

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former bosses, Justice O'Connor and Alex Kozinski. She reflected, "It truly felt like David and I were tagging along on a family road trip, while taking part in monumental civil rights discourse on the side." She added, "Judge Ikuta was a superlative jurist with a tremendous gift for cutting through complexity. I still hear her advice when facing thorny issues: 'take it back to first principles' - whether that meant researching texts back to the Founding Fathers or simply remembering why we practice law. Her precision with language and commitment to principled reasoning continue to guide my practice fifteen years later."

"Judge Ikuta was truly dedicated. She took great care with her family, but also herself by exercising daily and would be at work from 7:00 am until 7:00 pm without breaks," said Judge N. Randy Smith who also described her as "charitable, always willing to give to her staff as well as the court staff, and security officers." She was known to invite staff to her home for dinner and personally deliver holiday gifts throughout the court. These personal touches did not go without notice by staff as court birthdays were celebrated with cakes made by her husband, Ed, and toasted with personally vinted wine.

The theme that Judge Ikuta is and was a "Judge's Judge" was echoed by Judge Consuelo M. Callahan and Judge N. Randy Smith. "She never speaks without being totally prepared and her writing is clear and decisive," said Judge Smith. "With her brilliant and open mind and superb writing skills, she approached each case with no agenda and with a tireless work ethic" commented Judge Callahan and added, "she treated all dissenting views with respect and collegiality. We all should aspire to the example she provided us for 20 years. Her legacy will live on, and the impact of her opinions will be felt for generations to come."

Judge Ikuta is survived by her husband, Ed; daughter, Lillian; sister, Lorraine; and sister-in-law, Linda.

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