



Appellate lawyer Richard Strafer, right, with Miami criminal defense attorney Howard M. Srebnick. Strafer died on Friday.
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Top South Florida appellate lawyer dies from mysterious infection on European cruise

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Richard Strafer, a brilliant, behind-the-scenes appellate lawyer at the marquee criminal-defense firm in Miami, has been a fanatical runner and bicyclist for years. He competed in two World Championship Duathlons, finishing eighth in his age group in Spain in 2011 and 22nd in Hungary in 2007.

So when he set off on a leisurely European cruise in early June, his colleagues and friends thought it was a tad ironic.

Days after departing from Stockholm, Sweden, on a cruise to Norway, the 66-year-old Strafer caught a chest cold. It soon flared up to a 104-degree fever and pneumonia.

By mid-June, when the ship sailed into Greenwich, England, Strafer had already been under medical supervision for the latter half of the cruise. After being transferred to an English hospital, doctors gave him antibiotics for a worsening lung infection that they could not diagnose, but the medication proved ineffective. As his lungs deteriorated, Strafer went into cardiac arrest that cut off oxygen to his brain. Within a week, he slipped into a coma.

Strafer, considered to possess one of the sharpest legal minds in South Florida, never awoke from it. After being flown in a private air ambulance to Miami in early July, he was taken to Baptist Hospital, where a stream of family and friends visited his bedside. Baptist doctors concluded his coma was irreversible.

Over the past weekend, Strafer's family honored his living will and instructed doctors to remove him from life support. He died Friday morning.

"Everyone is heartbroken," said attorney Scott Kornspan, managing partner of Black, Srebnick, Kornspan & Stumpf, where Strafer worked for more than 15 years. "How does this happen on a cruise line to a perfectly healthy man? We're all in shock and dumbfounded about what happened."

Kornspan said he communicated with Strafer on June 17 just after he was transferred from the Viking Cruises ship to the English hospital. Strafer expressed alarm over his prognosis after doctors immediately told him in the hospital's ICU that if he had arrived three hours later he would have died. They also told him that because of the seriousness of his condition, he should contact next of kin and a spiritual adviser. After a few days of treatment, Strafer reached out to Kornspan again because his health was worsening; he asked him to contact a medical malpractice lawyer in Miami.

Strafer's husband, Jonathan Rick, who traveled with him on the European cruise, said the lack of proper treatment started on board the Swiss-based Viking Cruises ship. "I don't think they were aware of how serious this was," Rick said.

Rick also said that while Strafer was in the ICU at the hospital outside Greenwich, his lungs failed and his heart beat rapidly for several days. After the doctors put in a feeding tube on June 23, he went into cardiac arrest. "It did lead to a coma that he never came out of," Rick said.

Strafer's daughter, Jordan, a 26-year-old fine arts graduate student in New York, flew to England to be with her father. She said he was able to speak with her during the first few days at the hospital, until he became unconscious following the cardiac arrest. "It wasn't until we got to Baptist that we learned about the damage to his brain from the cardiac arrest," she said.

For Jordan Strafer, her father's unexpected death follows the loss of her mother, attorney Holly Skolnick, 59, who died of melanoma in 2013.

Jordan said she had a close relationship with her father, who was a lifelong teacher to her. "My dad showed me music, dancing, art, philosophy and literature," she said. "We would speak for

hours about all of these. He taught me how to write. He taught me to say what I want to say, in as few words possible. Last year, he began acting with me in my video artworks.”

Strafer attended the University of Wisconsin before going to law school at Northeastern University. Strafer also obtained a master’s degree in appellate practice from Georgetown University Law Center.

Strafer made his mark as an expert in appellate law, working alongside one-time partner Jose Quiñon, a prominent criminal defense attorney, and Robert Scola, a future state and federal judge.

One of his current law partners, Howard Srebnick — a high-profile trial attorney along with the firm’s famed leader, Roy Black — described Strafer as a “modest, intense, deep thinker” to whom top lawyers turned for advice and assistance on criminal trials and appeals — including a 2013 U.S. Supreme Court case on the government’s forfeiture of defendants’ assets before trial.

In that case, Srebnick and Strafer argued that defendants should be allowed to keep their bank accounts and other possessions unless prosecutors can show before trial that the evidence supporting an indictment justified the seizure of those assets. In 2014, the Supreme Court ruled 6-3 against the defendants.

Richard Strafer is survived by his daughter, Jordan; husband, Jonathan Rick, and mother-in-law, Esther Skolnick. Strafer is being cremated and buried next to his late wife, Holly Skolnick, at Mount Nebo Kendall Memorial Gardens at 10 a.m. on Aug. 6. Date and time for his memorial service will be announced in the future. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the Miami-based nonprofit group, Americans for Immigrant Justice.

Read more here: <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/article162846533.html#storylink=cpy>

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