



Dot Dobbins

July 17, 1947 - June 8, 2025

Dot Dobbins was a widely known and highly respected attorney in Nashville. Her practice of law spanned over forty years, dedicated to public service positions in her early career and private practice later. She specialized in family law with a particular concern for women and children in precarious situations. In Nashville, she was well known for her efforts to advance the participation of women in the field of law, and she was a role model for many. Dot was also deeply involved in programs to reduce violence in society. She died in a pedestrian traffic accident in Nashville on June 8, 2025.

Dot was born Dorothy Eileen Dobbins on July 17, 1947, in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Her father, C. Ray Dobbins, was an ordained minister who grew up in Denton, Texas, attended Bethel University in McKenzie, Tennessee, and earned a master's degree from the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. He spent his career as the editor of the denominational magazine of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Her mother, Mary Alice Smith Dobbins, was an elementary school teacher who grew up in Selmer, Tennessee, attended Bethel also, and received a master's degree in education from Peabody College (now affiliated with Vanderbilt University). She was a teacher for more than two decades at Presbyterian Day School in Memphis. Dot was the second of seven children in the family (the others were Catherine, James, Alyce, Bill, Cindy, and John) and became an anchor of support to both her siblings and her parents throughout her life. They grew up in Memphis where she attended Central High School. For college, Dot went to Southern

Methodist University in Dallas. Her studies focused on politics, religion, and history. She served as a dormitory resident adviser and became an officer in the campus YWCA, attending several national YWCA programs in New York and Berkeley. While in college, she participated in the Martin Luther King memorial march in Memphis in April 1968, after he was assassinated. Upon graduating from SMU in 1969, Dot worked for a year in welfare services in Dallas and then became a resident adviser to disadvantaged teenage girls in a Job Corps program in Jersey City, New Jersey, for one year. At that point, she decided to go to law school to enhance her skills and effectiveness in this type of work.

Dot entered Vanderbilt Law School in 1971 as one of only twelve women in a class of 150. She dutifully fulfilled the requirements for her law degree, but her real passion was to engage in community service as she had done before. Beginning in the summer after her first year at Vanderbilt, she worked for the Legal Aid Society of Nashville (known then as Legal Services). It is a nonprofit organization that provides legal assistance to low income and vulnerable members of the community. This is where Dot learned applied law—compiling cases, writing legal documents, and appearing in court. In her remaining two years of law school, she continued to work for Legal Aid part-time during the school year and full-time in the summer. Upon graduation and passing the bar exam, she was immediately employed as a staff lawyer in the Nashville office. During the next thirteen years at Legal Aid, she quickly emerged as head of its family law unit. Her work covered a variety of cases: adoption, divorce, child custody, child support, juvenile court matters, and domestic disputes of various types. She was particularly sensitive to the needs and safety of women and children in these cases.

One issue that Dot encountered frequently in her work was domestic violence. Women that she advised were sometimes caught in living situations where their spouse or partner became violent. Beyond simply counseling these women as clients, Dot was instrumental in working with the Nashville YWCA to establish the first domestic violence shelter in the city. She served as chair

of the YWCA in 1976–1977 and as a member of its board of directors for almost a decade. Under her leadership, the YWCA was transformed from a low-cost travelers' lodge for women into a multidimensional social organization. It currently provides mentoring for girls, women's workplace advice, family educational programs, domestic violence services, and other forms of community engagement.

Dot sought to support women in other ways as well. She was a longtime participant in a local women's discussion group that formed during her law school days around residents of Covey House, a communal group with which she had close ties. She continued to meet with this group regularly right up to the week before her death. Also, she was an early proponent for the creation of the Lawyers' Association for Women, which was established in 1981 with her as one of the founding members. It offered a support network for women lawyers in Nashville when they were few in number, and it has grown into a major professional organization with law-related programming, achievement awards, small grants for related projects, and an association newsletter.

In 1978 Dot married Paul Schrag, a native of Kansas whom she had met at Covey House six years earlier. He shared Dot's values but had a very different career path. He was a master builder involved in the restoration of historic buildings in Tennessee. Subsequently, he was employed by the Tennessee Department of Conservation where he rose to the position of Deputy Commissioner, and later he joined a new company overseeing the construction of high-quality daycare facilities for children. In 1980 Dot and Paul adopted a baby girl, Nan, who currently works as a nurse practitioner. She and her husband have a family of four children, who have been a constant joy to Dot. In 2002 Paul contracted a rare, degenerative neurological disease that caused him to decline dramatically. He died in 2008 at the age of 61. Dot was a loving caregiver to him throughout this period. Her loss of Paul so early was the saddest event of her life. After his passing, a series of small dogs—first Nina and Allie, then Sam, and most recently Angel—were her

constant and devoted companions.

Because of Dot's expertise and high profile in family law, she was invited to serve as the General Counsel of the Tennessee Department of Human Services in 1987. Her work included reviewing, as well as proposing, bills for consideration before the state legislature, and hence she spent much time on Capitol Hill meeting with legislators. Perhaps her greatest accomplishment in this period was the Tennessee Uniform Standard of Child Support Law, passed in 1989, which for the first time set guidelines for determining how child support was to be divided between separated parents. Dot had served on the commission formulating the proposal for this legislation even before she joined the Department of Human Services. After three and a half years as General Counsel in the Department, she decided to step down in 1990.

At this point Dot returned to the community not in a public service position but in private practice. Irwin Venick, an employment attorney in Nashville who had been a classmate of Dot's at Vanderbilt, invited her to practice with him, and in 1993 they established the law firm Dobbins & Venick. (Later they were joined in the firm by Jean Byassee, a healthcare and estate attorney.) Over the next twenty years, Dot was recognized in Nashville as an important attorney in family law. She handled scores of cases for individuals and groups in many different situations, including the League of Women Voters. She also continued her work in the public sector, serving on the Nashville Metro Social Services Commission and as a trustee on the public policy committee of Senior Citizens, Inc. She also helped draft the first Order of Protection legislation in Tennessee whereby court judges can issue orders to protect victims against abuse, threats of violence, and stalking. Dot's practice in family law continued until 2015 when she made the decision to retire.

Another volunteer commitment of Dot's during this stage of her life was the Alternatives to Violence Project. AVP is an international movement which offers experiential workshops that sensitize participants to violent tendencies in their lives and help them learn ways to defuse conflict and confrontation. Dot was always committed to peaceful means of resolving disagreements,

and she was an early supporter in Nashville of mediation in legal disputes and no-fault divorces in family law. She was trained and certified as an AVP facilitator in 2006, and from that time participated in numerous AVP workshops for community groups, and in schools, aftercare programs, jails, and prisons. Her commitment to this project motivated her to attend the AVP national meeting each year, as well as two AVP international meetings in Dublin and Kathmandu and an international conference on incarceration in Nairobi. On the very day that Dot died, she conducted an AVP exercise for the Nashville Friends Meeting, the Quaker religious community in Nashville with which she and her husband Paul had long been affiliated.

Another commitment of Dot's in the years after Paul died was to the co-housing project of Germantown Commons. Co-housing is a community model whereby a cluster of individual homes are built around a common space—a beautiful garden with a walkway, for instance—and the residents share public spaces—a meeting hall, a playground, etc.—that belong to the entire group. This configuration of housing is meant to nurture a sense of community and neighborly bond. The residents know each other, trust each other, and organize activities with each other. Germantown Commons is the one (and currently only) co-housing community in Nashville. Dot was an original, founding member of it and became a beloved figure in the community.

Finally, it is impossible to count all the ways that Dot was a pillar to her family over the years. This was not limited to her daughter, son-in-law, and four grandchildren. It included her parents who moved to Nashville in 1990, for they knew they could rely on her in their old age. Dot also, without thinking twice, would come to the aid of siblings who needed support at crucial moments in their lives. Nine adoring nieces and nephews, as well as their young children, have always looked upon Dot as the joyful aunt wearing colorful clothing who loved to put puzzles together with them. Each year Nashville has been the gathering place where the extended family comes at Christmastime—some thirty-five people stretching from coast to coast. Dot has been a magnetic force pulling them together. Her presence is now sorely

missed by them all, but they carry her memory, her love, and her ideals in their heart.

A Celebration of Life will be conducted at Brenthaven Cumberland Presbyterian Church, 516 Franklin Rd. Brentwood, TN 37027, Wednesday, June 18th, at 2:00PM with visitation beginning at 12 noon.

The family ask in lieu of flowers for Donations in Dot's name to:

AVP-USA Inc.

2136 Ford Parkway

Saint Paul, Minnesota 55116

Online at www.avpusa.org

The mission of AVP National is to build a movement of creative conflict resolution built on affirmation, respect for all, community, cooperation, and trust.

The Family of Dot Dobbins

Previous Events

Visitation

JUN 18. 12:00 PM - 2:00 PM (CT)

Brenthaven Cumberland Presbyterian Church
516 Franklin Rd.
Brentwood, TN 37027

Celebration of Life

JUN 18. 2:00 PM (CT)

Brenthaven Cumberland Presbyterian Church
516 Franklin Rd.
Brentwood, TN 37027

Tribute Wall

BJ

“ On behalf of AVP-USA Thank you for designating AVP-USA as the charity for memorials in the memory of Dot.

Bill Zuck, Jr. - August 19, 2025 at 08:54 PM

GS

“ Dot was such a kind neighbor to Me and Chef Troy! Always a bright smile and twinkle in her eyes. God bless and comfort her family and friends!



Gail Henry and Troy Spaulding - August 14, 2025 at 05:24 PM

“ Dot attended the 50th Avp conference at Manhattanville college, Westchester, NY.

She was in touch with me prior letting me know she will be there. We had several meals together including lunch the last day of conference. She had arranged to take an uber to the airport with another friend. Upon hearing this I offered to drive them to LaGuardia airport. Thinking I knew the way I did not rely on GPS. We chatted along the way until we look up to see a sign going the opposite way. The gps on the phones were activated to put us back on the right track. We arrived at the airport an hour late. She spoke to the attendant at the side walk check in. She came back to the car smiling, good news she said, we can still make the flight. Her friend and I jumped out of the car get the luggage on the conveyor belt, they hurried to the gate. She

Hurried anxiously along. I waited at home to hear from her when I didnt I emailed her. She called me immediately telling me how happy she was. Home safely and relaxing. I WAS MUCH RELIEVED. SINCE IN MY HEAD I THOUGHT I PROBABLY MADE HER MISS HER FLIGHT. I THANKED GOD! I WENT TO BED HAPPY. I LOOKED FORWARD TO BE ON ZOOM WITH HER LAST SUNDAY AS USUAL AND SINCE I WAS ON EARLY, THE HOST ASKED ME IF I HEARD ABOUT MY FRIEND DOT. THEN HE SAID TO ME, "BRACE MYSELF IT WAS NOT GOOD NEWS" still expecting the best, one other man came on and said " wow! Isn't it horrible what happened to Dot? Then he continued to tell the whole story. Glad that I made the decision to take spend those extra few minutes with her. She was not worried, she was just her happy jovial self during the trip to the airport. She never made me feel guilty. I sent her an email later thst night sunce I didnt hesr from her. She called me up with her jivial self she wasbhine safe and sound relaxing and happy. Reflecting on the past days. She had a good time. We usually talk about angel and my Cece. She praises and adores Angel care taker. So I am content ang e I eill be fine. I will miss my friend Dot. I pray she is in Heaven looking down on us. Asuring us allwill be well. Keep on doing the beautiful eork we do fir young people help steering them unto the positive pathways so they

would eventually lead successful lives and do the same for others. It was a gift meeting up abd knowung Dot.

CORALIE JOSEPH - June 19, 2025 at 07:03 AM