



Jefferson Grover Ray III

June 30, 1938 - September 8, 2025

Jefferson Grover Ray, III, of Mount Dora, Florida, died on September 8, 2025. Peacemaker, servant leader, father, grandfather, and friend to all, Jeff was a man of deep faith who sang and brought levity to everyone he encountered, even in his last days as his heartfelt tenor rang down the halls of the hospice home.

Jefferson arrived in this world on June 30, 1938, the son of J.G. Ray, Jr., and Bettye Bouterse. His father and grandfather, affectionately known as “Sunshine,” were early residents of Mount Dora, and Jeff grew up held by the hometown that was the only place he ever wanted to live. He and his two sisters and two brothers lived much of their childhood in a house their father built on Fairview Avenue, overlooking the railroad track and Lake Dora. Mischievous as a youngster, Jeff enjoyed playing pranks on friends and family. He attended the United Methodist Church of Mount Dora with his parents, and he became involved in the Boy Scouts.

As a teenager, Jeff worked for his father and grandfather building homes in Mount Dora. He swung hammers and learned carpentry and other homebuilding skills from his father’s most skilled and reliable craftsman, who was known as “Army Bell.” Jeff’s friendship and working relationship with Army Bell informed and inspired his lifelong commitment to civil rights for African Americans and all those who were discriminated against.

In high school, Jeff played football and was all-conference in basketball for the Mount Dora High School Hurricanes. Jeff also achieved the rank of Eagle Scout, and he was awarded the Babe Ruth Sportsmanship Award. When the fight for civil rights divided the high school's all-white student body, prompting those against civil rights to draw lines down the middle of the school's pathways, Jeff was one of few students who walked on the side of justice.

It was also in high school that Jeff met Pamela Brown, the love of his life. His love for Pamela stayed with him all his days. Graduating from high school in 1956, Jeff entered the University of Florida. In 1958, he paused his education and enlisted in the Army, serving in the intelligence division in the Pentagon. Jeff later explained that the Army selected him for this important work because officers were able to learn all about him simply by visiting his small hometown and inquiring. In August of 1959, Jeff married his high school sweetheart at St. Edward's Episcopal Church in Mount Dora — the pews for the new church having barely arrived in time.

In 1960, Pam and Jeff returned to Gainesville, where they finished and graduated from college and Jeff entered law school. Jeff became involved in student government, served as leader of the John Marshall Bar Association, and was elected mayor of Corey Village. In 1964, Jeff was elected to the prestigious Blue Key leadership fraternity at the University of Florida. Meanwhile, in January of 1962, Jeff and Pam's first daughter, Wendy Allison Ray, was born, followed two years later by a second daughter, Darby Kathleen. Jeff loved his time as a Florida Gator and would say to many that he bled orange and blue.

Upon graduating from law school in 1964, Jeff and Pam moved back to Mount Dora and into a home built by his father on Donnelly Avenue. Jeff joined the Gaylord law firm in Eustis, where he cut his teeth on civil and criminal litigation

and learned to handle trusts and estates. In 1966, Pam and Jeff moved into the home on Ninth Avenue where they raised their family for more than thirty years. A third daughter, Amy Elizabeth, was born in 1968 and then a son, Jefferson Grover Ray, IV, in 1970.

The home on Ninth Avenue hosted innumerable birthday parties, Easter egg hunts, side-yard football games, backyard volleyball games, gymnastic achievements, forts, swing sets, and dance parties, and Jeff participated in many of them. When costume competitions arrived, Jeff used his significant artistic and creative skills to create Halloween costumes and bike decorations that were works of art and frequently earned his children top prizes. He also functioned as a fun-loving “neighborhood dad,” leading bike rides to Trimble Park and spooking the kids as they camped out in the Ray back yard. When any of his four children was still roaming about the neighborhood at dinnertime, Jeff hailed them home with a whistle that could be heard blocks away. The whole neighborhood knew when it was time for the Ray kids to have supper, thanks to that magnificent whistle. Jeff could be seen nearly every weekend day doing yard work or sanding and painting the wrought-iron fence that surrounded the property. He also risked life and limb to paint one side of the house every year. Thanks to Jeff, the home he shared with Pam was always a favorite of passersby and visitors to Mount Dora.

In 1975, Jeff left the Gaylord firm and opened his own law practice in Mount Dora. Wilma DeDier, who served as Jeff’s paralegal and right hand for more than 50 years, worked with Jeff from the beginning, and together and over time, they developed a thriving law practice. They would later move into offices on Donnelly Street in Mount Dora, and Debbie Heath joined them in 1991 as receptionist and legal assistant.

Jeff specialized in wills, trusts, and estates, understanding his vocation as a

counselor who could guide individuals before death and families after their loved ones died. He would say to his children that money often brought out the worst in family members, and he worked hard to diffuse tensions and guide reconciliation. Jeff also handled the occasional adoption or family-law matter. But his mission and ministry were to serve his clients as an elder lawyer and to enable as many of his clients as possible to die at home with dignity. He regularly delivered or retrieved hospital beds, shopped for and delivered food, and visited with clients in their last weeks and days. Jeff served clients, whether or not they could pay him. It was not unusual for a client to “pay” him in collard greens, boiled peanuts, or even pizza. One year he received a homemade card on the Christmas tree from Darby in the shape of a peanut, assuring her dad that the family loved him even if he worked for peanuts. To his children, Jeff was their Atticus Finch, and they were immensely proud of his work.

Throughout his tenure as a family man and lawyer in Mount Dora, Jeff was also a community leader. Early in his time in Mount Dora, he formed the Young Democrats of Lake County, and he actively campaigned for state and national Democratic candidates, inspired by the energy and purpose of Jack and Bobby Kennedy. In 1969, Jeff co-chaired a committee with Professor C.O. Lott to improve conditions in Mount Dora’s primarily African American neighborhood, where he became a well-regarded ally for years to come. Jeff served as a youth counselor for the Florida Probation and Parole Committee. In 1970, Jeff was appointed by a member of Congress to serve on the Youth Board for the Fourth Congressional District. In that role, he assisted the Congressman’s youth committee and advised on local and federal collaborations to solve challenges faced by young people.

In 1976, Jeff was elected to Mount Dora’s City Council and then as president of the council the following month. In 1977, he served as Mount Dora’s youngest mayor. Leaving his post with the city council to serve as mayor, Jeff

appointed a woman to replace him on the all-male council, explaining that he “wanted a woman on council” and someone who would help his effort to dedicate much needed resources to underserved parts of town. After serving as mayor, Jeff returned to serve on the city council until leaving his post in 1981. His service in Mount Dora’s city government concluded, Jeff continued to serve on numerous boards and commissions. In the 1980s, he perceived a need for housing for adults who could not live independently, and he helped establish “Share a Home,” a non-profit organization that provided housing, meals, and support services to adults. Jeff was also instrumental in the founding of Hospice of Central Florida.

Jeff was a man of deep and capacious Christian faith. Inspired by Pamela’s example, he was confirmed as a member of St. Edward’s Episcopal Church in Mount Dora and served for decades as a lay reader and chalice bearer. He also served multiple terms on the vestry of the church, and he taught Sunday School for many years, including teaching Amy in her teen years. He sang in the St. Edwards choir for many years, singing alongside Wendy, Darby, and Amy when they were old enough to sing in the choir. His tenor was on key and beautiful. And on occasion, when the choir director asked, he enjoyed whistling a prelude or interlude. He and Pam later became members of St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Eustis, Florida, where Jeff enjoyed singing in the choir until 2023.

In 1996, Pam and Jeff moved from Mount Dora to a home on the shore of Lake Dorr near Altoona, Florida. Between 1998 and 2014, “Lala” and “Papa” welcomed nine grandchildren to their community of beloveds. Papa built a tree house with a porch and tin roof known as “Pirate’s Perch.” Still a prankster, he decorated Pirate’s Perch not only with pirate-themed flags and posters but also with a few stuffed rats to scare his “grands.” His pranks and jokes often elicited a loving eye roll and an “Ohhhh, Papa” refrain. The “grands” always looked forward to Papa’s pancakes, biscuits and honey

butter, and broiled brown sugar grapefruit. A special memory for each of them was loading into the back of Papa's old pickup truck on Christmas Eve and traveling to other homes in "Little Altoona" to sing Christmas carols.

Jeff took special pleasure in introducing his grands, all of whom lived out of state, to the rivers, lakes, and natural environment of Lake County. He taught them to fish and eventually bought a john boat they used for pre-dawn fishing expeditions. Jeff loved taking his grands on boat rides around Lake Dorr to look for eagles' nests, osprey, and alligators. He taught them about the cypress trees with their "knees," and he reveled in whipping them around the lake on a tube to see if they could hang on. Papa was a source of much laughter and joy and the occasional scream. His grands would not have had it any other way.

In 2021, Pam and Jeff yielded to the reality that both had been diagnosed with serious illness and needed to be in a more supportive living environment. Jeff spent his last years with Pam at Osprey Lodge, where he played innumerable games of chicken foot dominoes with friends or family. During this time, after giving up his law practice and driving privileges, his dear friend Susan Buss took him out for lunch adventures several times a week. After Pam died in 2023, Jeff mourned his bride of 63 years mightily, and he eventually moved to Discovery Village in Melbourne, where daughter Wendy was able to visit him regularly and help care for his needs. Darby, Amy, Jeff IV, and families regularly visited. Jeff IV took his dad on many adventures in his last years. Whatever memory Jeff lost, he retained his kindness and his sense of humor, and he is deeply missed by those who cared for him.

Many relatives and friends survive Jeff and will grieve his absence. These include the children and their spouses he loved so dearly: Wendy, Darby (Raymond), Amy (Leslie), and Jefferson (Brooke); his nine, pride-of-his-life

“grands,” Chandler, Langston (Sarah), Benjamin, Morgan, Elena, Hayden, Elizabeth, Vivian, and Carter; his brother, Chris (Cindy); and Pam’s sister, Debbie (Bob). Jeff was preceded in death by his parents; his sisters, Betty Ann and Becky; his brother, Michael; and beloved dogs, including Maggie Day, Jingle Bell, and Popcorn.

Those who wish to make a gift in Jeff’s honor may consider a donation to one of the following: The Mount Dora Community Trust, which supports non-profit organizations in Mount Dora ([link at moundoracommunitytrust.com](http://moundoracommunitytrust.com) – “in memory of Jefferson G. Ray, III”); or St. Thomas Thrift Shop, which supports low-income residents of downtown Eustis and makes grants to local organizations (Mail to St. Thomas Thrift Shop, 317 South Mary Street, Eustis, FL 32726 or contribute online at stthomaseustis.org/support/ – choose “Other Donations” and then enter “Thrift Shop – Jeff Ray” in Memo field).

A memorial service to celebrate Jeff’s life is planned for 2:00 p.m. on Saturday, September 27, at St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Eustis.

Previous Events

Memorial Service

SEP **27**. 2:00 PM (ET)

St. Thomas Episcopal Church
600 E Lemon Ave
Eustis, FL 32784

Tribute Wall

BF

“ He was my mother's (Elinor Cain) attorney for years and such a good, helpful man. I am sorry to hear of his passing but he is reunited with his dear Pam. Barb Froman

Barb Froman - November 14, 2025 at 04:35 PM

TY

“ Tammy Martin and Kaye Youngblood purchased the Country Basket Blooms for the family of Jefferson Grover Ray III.



Tammy Martin and Kaye Youngblood - September 25, 2025 at 05:09 PM



“ Country Basket Blooms was purchased for the family of Jefferson Grover Ray III.



September 18, 2025 at 02:50 PM

BM

“ I was organist and choir director at St. Edwards Episcopal Church, for many years. Jeff was a valuable member of the choir, and a good friend. Many great memories. The heavenly chorus has gained a great tenor!

Bob Miller - September 13, 2025 at 11:14 AM

MF

“ He was our introduction to Mount Dora and what a wonderful neighborhood we moved to. Many loving memories

Marcia Ford - September 12, 2025 at 11:03 AM

AT

“ I am so sad to hear that Jeff passed. He was great to work with in the business environment, and a wonderful man. I used to just sit and chat with him when I would go to his office. He mostly spoke of Pam and the children. He was proud of the kids! Jeff was my choice to handle my son's estate. He treated everyone like a friend.

My condolences to the entire family. I know you are grieving a great loss.

Ann Tallman - September 12, 2025 at 09:49 AM

FD

“ Frank Driggers lit a candle in memory of Jefferson Grover Ray III



Frank Driggers - September 12, 2025 at 09:44 AM

EV

So very sorry to hear of your dad and mother. I knew the Ray family from St Edward's. As children we used to swim at the church pool while my mother and Mrs Ray would visit. Those were wonderful days in Mount Dora. As a adult I met with Mr.Ray about a legal matter. He was very professional and put my mind at ease. Again, my heartfelt condolences to the family of very nice people

Elaine Frances Donofrio Veilleux - October 28, 2025 at 03:53 PM