

Conservationist Jimmy Chandler, the underdog lawyer who battled big corporations and influential developers in S.C. courts for nearly three decades, died Saturday night after an eight-month battle with cancer. Chandler, of Pawleys Island, was 60.

Since the early 1980s, the unflappable Chandler had been the face of environmental law in South Carolina's Lowcountry and a leading advocate of protecting the marshes, beaches, rivers and lakes that define the Palmetto State.

His groundbreaking legal work stopped dredging projects in salt marshes, bridges through swamps, toxic waste sites in poor communities, and most recently, the coming of mega-garbage dumps in rural S.C. counties.

In the mid-1980s, Chandler won a landmark case in Georgetown County that has since prevented developers from digging canals through South Carolina's vast coastal tidelands. Many consider the Willbrook dredging case one of the most important in coastal environmental law.

But Chandler's biggest legal coup may have occurred in 2000, when he and Columbia lawyer Bob Guild persuaded the S.C. Court of Appeals to close a hazardous waste landfill on the shores of Lake Marion. Their fight against the influential Laidlaw/Safety-Kleen waste company had lasted more than 15 years.

Chandler did most of his work for environmental groups and citizens' associations, often at reduced rates or no cost.

The effort was supported by charitable foundations and Frances Close, a member of the prominent Springs textile family. Even with the financial support, Chandler never earned much more than a modest living. But Chandler's nonprofit S.C. Environmental Law Project often proved to be the only obstacle in the way of businesses wanting to build in ecologically sensitive areas. The S.C. Environmental Law Project celebrated its 23rd anniversary in 2010.

"He helped a lot of people who would not otherwise have had legal protection because they couldn't pay the fees," said Nancy Cave, an official with the S.C. Coastal Conservation League. "He worked for the environment and he worked for our communities."

Chandler made plenty of people mad in his days as an environmental lawyer, ranging from big business groups to state regulators. In one recent case, he doggedly grilled a water quality regulator until the man admitted his agency had not considered all of the impacts an apartment complex would have on a scenic lily pond near Columbia.

The balding Chandler was easy to spot in a courtroom. Often wearing khakis and a sport coat, he regularly took on well-armed teams of blue-suited corporate lawyers and attorneys from state agencies — by himself. He didn't always win, but many of his cases raised enough of a ruckus to alter development plans or result in environmental cleanups. Chandler was always prepared with a slew of facts.

In a 2007 interview with *The State*, Chandler said he probably could have made a small fortune working for a big corporate firm, but he always preferred the role of citizens' advocate.

"I'm glad I did it," the plain-spoken Chandler said of his career path. "You don't get paid as much as if you worked at one of the big law firms. But people appreciate it. And it means I probably



sleep better at night than I otherwise would have.”

Those who knew him said Chandler’s death leaves a gaping hole in the state’s environmental movement. The Environmental Law Project has about 20 pending court cases, including one challenging huge landfills in Marlboro County and several other rural communities.

Chandler’s legal knowledge, which dates to the infancy of many state conservation laws, was so extensive that he even held seminars for young regulators at the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control.

“He knew the law better than the DHEC attorneys did,” said retired environmental regulator Sally Knowles, once one of DHEC’s highest-ranking water quality officials.



For decades, Chandler and his friend Guild were the only S.C. lawyers who focused exclusively on representing citizens and conservation groups in environmental cases. The Southern Environmental Law Center, a regional legal group, has begun working more frequently in South Carolina during the past decade, but one of the group’s lawyers said Chandler’s efforts were unsurpassed — and well-known among environmental attorneys in other states.

“He really blazed the trail for environmental law in South Carolina,” said Blan Holman, an attorney with the law center, which is headquartered in Virginia. “It’s hard to count the number of really important decisions for which he is responsible. It seems like he’s been involved in every important environmental case from the get-go.”

Unlike the law center, which has a team of attorneys, Chandler’s Environmental Law Project was a one-person outfit until he hired co-counsel Amy Armstrong about eight years ago. They worked from a renovated Georgetown home where his grandparents once lived.

Chandler grew up in Georgetown, the son of a local car dealer. He graduated from Winyah High School in 1968 and

Davidson College four years later. He played in a band during high school and worked briefly on a fishing boat after college. After getting a law degree from the University of South Carolina in 1977, he became a business lawyer in Columbia.

But he branched into environmental law upon learning about plans for an oil refinery in Georgetown in 1981. Worried about the polluting impacts a refinery could have on the tidelands of his hometown, he took the case on. And although he did not win in court, Chandler prompted enough questions that the project lost political support and eventually was abandoned.

The last year of his life had been a difficult one for Chandler, his wife and their 16-year-old daughter.





He underwent heart surgery in October 2009 and was recovering when doctors found he had kidney cancer that had spread to his lungs. They removed a kidney in the spring and began treatments in an attempt to shrink the lung tumors.

For a while, he responded well and was working full-time on legal cases through late May. He was hospitalized July 27 in Murrells Inlet after becoming weak. Chandler was taken last week to the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston, where he died Saturday night.

Chandler is survived by his wife, Rebecca, and daughter, Leigh, as well as two sisters. His law partner, Armstrong,

announced his death Sunday afternoon in an e-mail to friends. She said Chandler “lived a remarkable life.”

While best known for his legal work and passion to protect the environment, Chandler had another side that many people never saw. His daughter was born while Chandler was in his 40s – and her birth was a life-changer.

As the youngster grew up, she became adept at softball. And her dad was quietly proud. In recent years, Chandler would return telephone calls to reporters from softball fields across South Carolina. He didn’t brag, but he always would mention Leigh’s games, in his low-key way.

Nancy Vinson, with the Coastal Conservation League, is a long-time friend who called Chandler her “mentor” on environmental issues. She said he recently recounted a story about Leigh’s academic exploits that made Vinson smile.

Leigh, a student at Waccamaw High School in Pawleys Island, had done well in a school debate and told her dad about it.

“She said, ‘Dad, maybe I would be a good lawyer one day like you,’” Vinson recalled Chandler saying. “He didn’t come out and say it, but I could tell he was grinning inside. He was so proud of her. The happiest day of his life was when that child was born.”

A visitation will be held 6-8 p.m. Tuesday at the Mayer Funeral Home in Georgetown. Funeral services will be held at 2 p.m. Wednesday at Georgetown Presbyterian Church.

