



DOUG KAPUSTIN : SUN STAFF

City Administrative Judge Marcella A. Holland says much of her drive and personality comes from her upbringing as the daughter of a minister and civil rights leader.

# Judge has docket filled with ideas

**Change:** New city administrative leader hopes to address the ills of the court and the courthouse.

By ALLISON KLEIN  
SUN STAFF

Marcella A. Holland, Baltimore's new top Circuit Court judge, said when she accepted the job, she thought she understood the daunting job ahead of her: leading the most backlogged court system in the state, and dealing with some of the city's most violent criminals.

She did not expect that in her first week she would also be solving problems such as clogged toilets in the courthouse jail and a broken elevator.

"I didn't realize they call the administrative judge for every little thing," said Holland, who replaced retired Judge Ellen M. Heller in November. "I would have never thought these would be my issues my first week."

But after spending almost two decades working as a prosecutor, then a judge, Holland said that she is used to the unpredictability of Baltimore's overburdened Circuit Court.

## Marcella A. Holland

**Age:** 55

**Position:** New administrative judge for Baltimore Circuit Court

**Home:** Mt. Washington

**Grew up:** Rural Howard County

**Education:** University of Maryland, Baltimore County, bachelor's degree  
University of Maryland School of Law, law degree

**Background:** Legal secretary, Baltimore prosecutor, Circuit Court judge since 1997.

**Personal:** Single, no children

"Day to day you never know what will come up around here," she said.

As administrative judge, Holland hopes to address the problems of the court and the courthouse. She hopes to find innovative ways to manage the bulging dockets of drug cases. And she wants to move out of the rundown Clarence M. Mitchell Jr. Courthouse and into a new building, a process that has been in the planning [See Holland, 2B]

# City judge has full docket

[Holland, from Page 1B]

phase for years.

The ever-increasing felony docket reached 9,741 in 2002, a 21 percent rise since 2000, when there were 8,043 cases. Holland, 55, a native of rural Howard County, became the first African-American woman to head a Circuit Court in Maryland when she was appointed by state Court of Appeals Chief Judge Robert M. Bell in August.

At the time, Holland, who has been a judge since 1997, was in charge of the family division. Before being appointed to the bench, she had been an assistant state's attorney in Baltimore for 13 years.

As a city prosecutor, she worked in the economics crime unit under division head Elizabeth A. Ritter, who describes Holland as "direct and no-nonsense."

"Some judges don their black robes and forget where they came from," Ritter said. "That's not who she is. She's not the kind of person who had plaques on her walls or pictures of herself everywhere."

Holland said much of her drive and personality comes from her upbringing as the daughter of a minister and civil rights leader. Her father, the late Rev. John W. Holland,



DOUG KAPUSTIN: SUN STAFF  
**Judge Marcella A. Holland says she is used to the unpredictability of the city's Circuit Court.**

served as president of the Howard County chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Her mother, Agnes O. Holland, 92, raised four children with a loving but stern hand. "I had a strong family," Holland said. "My parents are from a generation that came through struggle."

As a child, she said it was common for civil rights pioneers Lillie M. Carroll Jackson and Clarence M. Mitchell to call her and ask how she was doing in school, or to remind her that they had to struggle so she

could go to school with white children.

She was the only black person at Glenelg High School when she began seventh grade.

Although she was a member of the school band, she did not go on a band trip to Ocean City because the school thought the color of her skin would cause problems in the resort town. After that, she stayed away from the Eastern Shore for decades.

"The first time I went over the Bay Bridge was in 1998 or '99 when there was a judicial conference," Holland said.

After high school, she became a legal secretary in Washington before returning to college with the ambition of becoming a lawyer.

After graduation from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, she earned a law degree from the University of Maryland School of Law in 1983. Soon after, she joined the city state's attorney's office. She now lives in Mount Washington.

Circuit Judge Althea Handy, who has been friends with Holland since both worked as prosecutors, said Holland is an ideal pick for administrative judge because of her cool temperament.

"She's even-keeled and thoughtful," Handy said. "She never makes rash decisions."

As a judge and prosecutor, Holland said several cases have made significant impacts on her. One was the murder trial of Tonya Lucas, whom Holland prosecuted in 1993 for killing six of her seven children by setting a fire in the family's East Baltimore rowhouse.

"That was the worst mother I'd seen in my life," Holland said. "She sat there through the trial with a stone-cold look on her face. It was the most depressing case."

Among the more delicate cases she handled from the bench was that of Howard Whitworth, who was convicted of the 2001 execution-style murder of Baltimore police agent Michael J. Cowdery Jr. The courtroom was packed with uniformed police officers and the defendant's family for the tense, three-week trial.

Holland derives more satisfaction from working in family court than criminal court, she said, because she feels she can have a positive impact on family members' lives.

"There are no real winners," she said, "in criminal cases."