

The Sun

**WJZ-TV bars its equipment in election ads
Policy was changed after pressure from coalition of blacks
Dispute arose in judges' race
Reporter used gear from station on spots for candidate-wife**

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Howard County's African-American community has pressured WJZ-TV into changing a policy that allowed reporter Dick Gelfman to rent station equipment to help his wife battle -- and ultimately defeat -- the county's first black judge.

After agreeing to the new policy last week, WJZ-TV General Manager Marcellus Alexander announced the change -- through a spokesman -- at a forum sponsored by Howard's African American Coalition in Columbia yesterday.

"To avoid even the hint of any perceived or real impropriety," Alexander's statement said, "WJZ-TV will not solicit -- or accept -- any political advertising production."

Neither Alexander nor Gelfman returned phone messages left yesterday at their homes.

Coalition leaders yesterday called the change in policy a victory but vowed to push ahead with formal complaints against the station with the Justice Department, Federal Communications Commission and state election board.

At the heart of the complaints is Gelfman's rental of a WJZ-TV camera and editing equipment to make cable television ads for his wife, Judge Lenore R. Gelfman, in her battle for the Circuit Court bench. She won one of two seats in the four-way race Nov. 5.

Among the losers in that election -- widely considered the most bitter and expensive in county history -- was Donna Hill Staton, whom Gov. Parris N. Glendening had appointed as Howard's first African-American judge a year earlier.

That defeat brought cries of racism from county African-American leaders and others, prompting yesterday's forum organized by the African American Coalition, an umbrella group of about 50 black organizations in Howard County. About 70 people attended the meeting at the Wilde Lake Interfaith Center in Columbia.

Speakers at the forum complained that Hill Staton's white supporters in the Democratic Party didn't do enough and that her rivals - Gelfman and local attorney Jonathan Scott Smith -- used campaign tactics to exploit racial divisions, a charge the Gelfman-Smith ticket vehemently disputes.

"This is supposed to be the place where diversity is embraced," said the Rev. Robert A. F. Turner, coalition president, "but it seems as if there is a gap, a gulf between the diversity that is communicated in general conversation and the results of general elections."

Call for commitment

Speakers also called for renewed commitment -- time and money -- to electing or appointing blacks to top government jobs, including to one of the two open spots on Howard's District Court, which is lower than Circuit Court. Those seats await Glendening appointments.

"Black people have to sacrifice," said John Clark, an attorney who lives in Columbia's Wilde Lake village. "There are people who

pay more a month for a car note than they've ever given to a campaign."

Howard County has not elected an African-American to countywide office since 1982, when Councilman C. Vernon Gray, an east Columbia Democrat, was voted in. He has been re-elected, but the County Council is now divided into districts. William Manning was also elected to the school board in 1982 but later lost that seat.

Racial politics lurked in the Circuit Court battle from the beginning. Glendening declared the need for diversity last year when he appointed Hill Staton and Diane O. Leasure to join what had been an all-white, all-male court.

When Gelfman and Smith challenged the appointments, they complained that Glendening had put the quest for diversity above qualifications.

What followed was a bitter, yearlong struggle in which race -- and charges of racism -- were never far below the surface.

In the vote, sitting judges **Leasure** and Hill Staton had almost identical numbers in Columbia, which prides itself on diversity and has a 20 percent black population -- compared with 12 percent for the county in general.

In Ellicott City, Elkridge and western Howard, Hill Staton trailed her running mate by about two percentage points. That difference cost her the election.

'Racist campaign'

At yesterday's forum, pollster J. Bradford Coker of Mason/Dixon Political-Media Research in Columbia and a Hill Staton supporter, repeated his claim that Gelfman and Smith ran a campaign exploiting racial divisions in the community.

"This was probably the most blatantly racist campaign I've seen run in this county in 20 years," Coker said.

He and other speakers pointed particularly to a campaign mailing that on one page showed pictures of Hill Staton and Gray -- who recommended her appointment to Glendening, a political ally.

Smith and Gelfman have disputed the charge that their tactics were racist and offered other explanations for Hill Staton's loss. They said **Leasure** enjoyed a better reputation among lawyers and that Hill Staton lost votes by appearing last on a ballot organized by alphabetical order.

Reached by telephone yesterday, Smith defended his campaign's tactics and said it was **Leasure** and Hill Staton's campaign that focused on race.

"How in the world do you claim it's racist when the white male came in fourth?" asked Smith, referring to himself. "I don't follow it. It just doesn't compute in my mind."

But speakers at the forum were nearly unanimous in suggesting that race -- if not outright racism -- was a major factor in Hill Staton's loss.

Cheryl Miller, a political science professor at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, said African-Americans are more likely to win elections if they run campaigns that avoid the subject of race. But she said Hill Staton's opponents emphasized it.

"As long as you have tactics like that, it's more likely white voters will {focus} in on the race of the candidates," Miller said.

Weak support from whites

Several speakers also blamed Hill Staton's loss on weak support from the Democratic Party's white elected leaders.

The race was technically nonpartisan but Howard's Democratic Central Committee endorsed **Leasure** and Hill Staton. No white elected Democrat endorsed the ticket, in part because several were friends with Gelfman, also a Democrat.

"Many white officials particularly did not stand up, did not come forward," said Annapolis City Councilman Carl O. Snowden, an African-American Democrat likely running for mayor there. "At the stroke of a pen, the governor was able to make history, and yet that history was reversed."

A final target was WJZ-TV. Several speakers objected to Dick Gelfman -- on Baltimore television for more than 18 years -- having

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such a prominent role in the campaign. He was a top strategist and the leading force behind highly polished television ads produced with his own equipment and some rented from WJZ-TV.

Ethel Hill, the mother of Donna Hill Staton, said after yesterday's meeting that WJZ-TV should not have allowed Gelfman to stay on the air during the campaign.

Hill also criticized WJZ-TV reporter Denise Koch for her comments at a Howard County ball held by County Executive Charles I. Ecker shortly before the election. From the podium, Koch reportedly wished Gelfman a happy birthday, then reminded the large crowd that she was a Howard County voter.

The African American Coalition, of which Hill is a member, filed complaints with the FCC and intends to do the same with the Justice Department and the state election board, charging that WJZ gave Gelfman and Smith an unfair advantage in the election.

They complained about the equipment rental and the absence of any reference to it in a campaign finance report two weeks before the election. Campaign officials said the bill didn't come until later. The expense, \$2,133, was reported after the election.

'Too little, too late'

Alexander announced WJZ-TV's new policy barring station equipment from political use at the coalition meeting through spokesman Michael Easterling, the station's programming and public affairs director.

Under the new policy, WJZ-TV will not supply or rent equipment to any candidate, and no station employee has permission to work on any aspect of political ad production while on station time.

"We hope this will clarify our position to the satisfaction of all concerned," the statement concluded.

Hill, who complained to Alexander months ago about the station's involvement, said the gesture was "too little, too late."

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