

The Sun

**Bitter taste lingers after judges' race**  
**Gelfman takes oath**  
**Hill Staton ponders next career move**  
**Brief, private ceremony**  
**Judge won post after failure to win appointment**  
**SERIES -- GELFMAN. First of two parts**

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With a hand on the Bible and husband, Dick Gelfman, by her side, Judge Lenore R. Gelfman became Howard County's newest Circuit Court judge Friday morning in a ceremony that was everything her struggle for the job was not.

Private. Brief. Joyful.

The hastily called ceremony -- an early morning event three days before the publicly announced date -- culminated Howard's nastiest, most expensive and perhaps strangest political battle.

It also ended a personal saga for Gelfman -- a lifelong Democrat who parlayed Republican support and name recognition into the first defeat ever for a sitting Howard County judge.

The fight left deep rifts in the county's legal community and among local Republicans, a tightknit group that worked together for years to take control of Howard's government before ending up on opposite sides of the judges' race.

"From day one, this has been all about {Gelfman}," said Columbia pollster Brad Coker, a Republican and supporter of Gelfman's rivals. "We were all one big, happy family. And now, there are a few of those people who I don't care if I ever speak to again. All because of who? Lenore Gelfman."

Donna Hill Staton, Howard's first African-American judge and the woman Gelfman replaced, had cleared out her chambers Wednesday. She has had numerous calls about career options -- including returning to private practice -- since the Nov. 5 election.

Friday, Hill Staton was at home in Clarksville with her children when Circuit Court Clerk Margaret D. Rappaport -- a key Gelfman supporter -- gathered a small group in her office to swear in Gelfman.

Also there were Judge Raymond J. Kane Jr.; retired Judge R. Russell Sadler; Gelfman's brother; her running mate, attorney Jonathan Scott Smith; and a handful of campaign officials and volunteers.

Judge James B. Dudley, the only Circuit Court judge scheduled to be in court that day, learned about Gelfman's swearing in as he arrived in the courthouse parking lot after it was over.

At the ceremony, Dick and Lenore Gelfman stood under a white trellis laced with plastic ivy -- a place that would be the scene of a wedding a half-hour later -- as Rappaport led her through the oath.

Gelfman's brother videotaped the event -- after receiving a few tips from Dick Gelfman, a reporter for WJZ-TV who made his wife's campaign ads.

Afterward, Judge Gelfman said she was ready to get to work: "I expect to sit on Circuit Court midweek, but there's no rush. I still have some cases to take care of in District Court."

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Howard County District Court is where Gelfman became a judge, appointed by then-Gov. William Donald Schaefer in 1989. She first applied for a Circuit Court job that year, then did so again in 1990 and 1995.

Last fall, when Gov. Parris N. Glendening rejected her in favor of Hill Staton and Diane O. Leasure -- attorneys with no experience as judges -- Gelfman decided to challenge them.

The Constitution required that they beat all comers in the next election to confirm their 15-year appointments.

Smith, a Republican attorney, joined the race first as Gelfman's campaign manager, then as her running mate. He had few ties to the local party establishment, but many prominent Republicans rallied around the ticket in hopes of hurting Glendening, a Democrat.

Gelfman enjoyed natural advantages. Her husband has a statewide reputation after more than 18 years on Baltimore television. And she had a reputation as a good district judge.

"I think Judge Gelfman was the logical person to be chosen head and shoulders above everyone else," Del. Robert L. Flanagan of Ellicott City, a Republican lawyer who supported Gelfman, said before the election. "Many people could not understand why she did not receive the appointment."

But even so, teaming with Smith helped Gelfman win the Republican primary in March. In the general election, Smith became the campaign's leading spokesman, focusing on crime and criticizing Hill Staton and Leasure.

Gelfman largely avoided controversial public statements, though both campaigns attacked each other viciously in television advertisements, mailings and debates.

Polling done by the rival campaign in August found that one-third of Howard's Republican voters thought Gelfman was a Republican. Only one of 10 Republican voters identified Gelfman as a Democrat.

She had similar support in the general election. Gelfman won 67 percent of the Republican vote -- higher even than Smith, the race's only Republican -- according to exit polls by the rival campaign.

That margin helped propel her narrowly past Hill Staton, into the second spot behind Leasure. Smith lost by a wider margin.

"Sometimes you get half a loaf," said County Council Chairman Darrel E. Drown, an Ellicott City Republican. "And I have come to really like Norie Gelfman."

The campaign was Howard's most expensive ever. Between the primary and general election, the campaigns combined to spend \$463,000, shattering the previous record of \$289,000 spent on the 1994 county executive's race.

After the election Nov. 5, Hill Staton finished some final cases before stepping down Wednesday. She has also fielded calls about possible jobs, including some with law firms. She plans to take some time to contemplate her future, she said Friday.

"This is not the end for me. It is simply a stop along the way," Hill Staton said. "When life gives you lemons, you make lemonade."

Though she fought hard to keep the judgeship, her time on the bench will broaden a resume that includes a partnership at one of Baltimore's most prestigious law firms.

During her year on the bench, Hill Staton's mother underwent surgery and her grandmother had a stroke. And Hill Staton and Leasure -- despite the intense campaigning -- worked hard to lessen a backlog of Circuit Court cases.

Some lawyers criticized Hill Staton as slow to make rulings, but she said she was proud to serve on the bench and has no regrets.

"Any disappointment I had was that I am not able to continue in a job that I enjoyed," Hill Staton said. "We were consistent in saying that we would not do anything to demean the office. While the outcome was not what I had hoped I have to be proud of the way I conducted myself as a candidate and a judge."

### Call to end elections

The heated race also prompted calls to end judicial elections.

Critics, including a state committee studying the future of the courts, said running campaigns keeps judges from doing their jobs

and invites ethical problems.

Contributions from lawyers -- whom the judges must treat impartially -- pay for much of judges' campaigns.

Dudley, the circuit judge who favors judicial elections, said this election brought all these issues to the forefront in Howard County.

Easing tensions

But he said tensions in the courthouse will ease now that the election is over.

Lawyers, Dudley said, "are bootlickers."

But for many in the legal and political community -- Republicans, Democrats, lawyers supporting both sides -- the election is remembered as the vicious fight no one seemed to win.

"Hopefully," said Lin Eagan, campaign chairwoman for Leasure and Hill Staton, "we won't see anything like this again."

About this series

Fallout continues from the ascent of Judge Lenore R. Gelfman from Howard County's District bench to Circuit Court. Tomorrow, part two of this series will look at the understaffed District Court -- and the two new judicial vacancies Gov. Parris N. Glendening must fill.

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Caption:  
PHOTO

Caption: Sworn in: Former District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman became the county's newest Circuit Court judge Friday.

Credit: SUN STAFF : 1995

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