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Dick Gelfman's campaign role raises questions
CAMPAIGN 1996

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Dick Gelfman, one of Baltimore's most prominent television journalists, has emerged in recent months as the media guru of his wife's campaign for Howard County Circuit judge -- using equipment and services rented from his employer, WJZ-TV, to help make her campaign ads.

The practice raises ethical issues for Gelfman and the station, which permitted the rental for campaign use. It also calls into question the accuracy of a campaign financial disclosure report filed last week, which reflected none of Gelfman's ad-making activity either at WJZ or his home studio. State law generally requires such reports to list all expenses and in-kind donations of goods and many types of services -- even from a candidate or spouse. Officials with the campaign of Gelfman's wife, District Court Judge Lenore R. Gelfman, say they have met all such requirements.

Gelfman and station officials say he has acted appropriately as a supportive spouse, carefully separating his identity as a journalist from his campaign work.

"I am first and foremost my wife's biggest supporter," said Gelfman, a consumer affairs reporter on Baltimore television. "I've not done anything to bring my company in any way in association with the campaign."

But journalism professors -- noting that journalists must protect their credibility as objective reporters -- say Gelfman may have crossed ethical boundaries by crafting the campaign ads and using some station equipment to do so.

"I think it's very poor judgment on the part of station management," said University of Maryland journalism professor Steve Barkin. "There's a need for the news division of a television station to separate the private interests of its reporters from public issues upon which the station is expected to report in a neutral manner."

Gelfman's wife and her running mate, Ellicott City attorney Jonathan Scott Smith, are battling for two seats on the Howard Circuit Court against Judges Diane O. Leasure and Donna Hill Staton.

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