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Candidates deny blame for ugly race
Sitting judges accuse challengers, who criticize news media
New spat breaks out
Gelfman, Smith say foes improperly used political ties
CAMPAIGN 1996

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Both sides in the Howard County Circuit Court race yesterday disavowed blame for the nasty tone of their campaign -- even as a new spat was breaking out between them.

At a forum at Howard Community College, sitting Circuit Judges Donna Hill Staton and Diane O. Leasure blamed their opponents for the nasty campaign. Said Hill Staton: "Anything we've done, we've done because we were forced to respond to their type of campaign."

In turn, the challengers -- District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman and attorney Jonathan Scott Smith -- faulted the news media for, in Smith's words, trying "to pit one campaign against the other." Added Gelfman: "Right from the beginning, we've tried consistently to maintain positive images."

But even as both sides denied responsibility for the heated campaign, the sitting judges were complaining bitterly about new campaign literature being distributed in the western part of Howard by the challengers.

The literature, which the challengers' campaign began handing out last weekend, accuses Leasure and Hill Staton of benefiting improperly from political ties to, respectively, Gov. Parris N. Glendening and Howard County Councilman C. Vernon Gray.

It outraged Gray. "I'm absolutely shocked that two candidates for judge would stoop so low to engage in such a scurrilous campaign. They're not running to be dogcatchers, but to be judges," Gray said in a phone interview.

The campaign literature charges that Leasure was appointed to the bench because she had participated in a fund-raiser for Glendening just before her appointment. It also charges that Glendening rewarded Gray, the county's top black elected official, by appointing Hill Staton as the Howard courts' first black judge.

Gray responded that Gelfman and Smith had sought support from various politicians -- including himself -- in seeking the judgeships.

"Gelfman got to the District Court because of politics," Gray said. "I know for a fact she had Howard County delegates and senators talk to {then-Gov. William Donald Schaefer} on her behalf.

"To criticize that process because they weren't selected is highly hypocritical," Gray said, adding that Smith sought his support in his Circuit Court bid. Dick Gelfman, a WJZ-TV personality, also lobbied him on his wife's behalf, Gray said.

On the challengers' side, Republican Del. Robert L. Flanagan defended the campaign literature.

"Throughout the history of the race, the Glendening judges have gone around the county bragging about the process by which they were elected," Flanagan said. "In a direct response to that bragging, we are pointing out that this process was overly politicized.

"It's not negative campaigning," he said. "It's forthright and direct."

On the cover of the literature is a picture of Glendening; inside, there are separate photos of Gray and Hill Staton side by side.

On another page, there is a picture of the invitation sent to attendees of the governor's fund-raiser; under the invitation is a photo of a smiling Leasure with the words "Reason to smile."

The words "\$350 donation" on the invitation are circled with the note "Only Fat Cats Invited." Its location, Cattail Creek Country Club, is circled with the note "Exclusive Country Club."

Smith -- who was invited to the fund-raiser, but did not attend -- is himself a founding member of the country club in Glenwood, joining in December 1992, seven months before it officially opened, said Esther Oakes, a marketing assistant for the club.

It costs \$32,500 for a family to join, and monthly dues are \$300, she said.

The handout also claimed that the sitting judges were being "bankrolled by special interests from outside Howard County," while the challengers have only received small contributions from friends and relatives.

While criticizing the sitting judges' political ties, the challengers' literature boasted of their endorsements by Flanagan, County Councilman Darrel E. Drown, a Republican, and former Howard County Executive William E. Eakle Sr., among other Howard political figures.

Hill Staton characterized the literature as an effort by the challengers to "woo voters with manufactured issues. They say they want to take the politics out of it, but most everyone speaking for them {in the literature} is or was a politician."

Leasure said the literature is in marked contrast to the challengers' claim that they are running a positive campaign. "I must admit that when they mentioned that at the forum, it was hard for me to keep a straight face," she said.

Also at the Howard Community College debate:

Leasure was asked if her participation in the Glendening fund-raiser was a conflict of interest. She said: "Not in the least. I had a lot of contact with the business community. It's part of the cost of working with a law firm."

Gelfman was asked why she and Smith in September left the scene of a car accident, attributed by some to their sign-waving at an intersection during rush hour. She said: "Sign-waving is a Howard County tradition. It was a nonevent; one car rolled into another. It turned out the lady was a friend of Leasure and reported back to her campaign. I was due in court, and there was no 'accident' to report" because it was so minor.

Smith was asked about a case in which he represented a client charged with second-degree murder, voluntary manslaughter and reckless endangerment. The client faced at least 30 years in jail, but got a five-year sentence. He said: "I urged him to take responsibility for what he did. The sentence was appropriate based on the facts of the case."

Hill Staton was asked if race and gender were factors in the appointments of her and Leasure and in any opposition to their election. She said: "All I'll say is I'm glad to hear from the Gelfman and Smith campaign that we are no longer the 'affirmative action appointments.' That's good news."

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