

The Sun

**Race debate follows election**  
**First black judge in county, Hill Staton, apparently defeated**  
**Some blame 'racism'**  
**Observers believe absentee ballots won't alter outcome**

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The battle for two seats on Howard County's Circuit Court is over -- with absentee ballots unlikely to change the outcome -- but voters' apparent rejection of the county's first black judge has left questions as bitter as the campaign itself.

The day after the vote, the two camps debated whether the narrow defeat of Donna Hill Staton turned on issues of race.

A Sun analysis of poll results showed that Hill Staton trailed her running mate, Diane O. Leasure, by about two percentage points everywhere but in Columbia, which has an African-American population of about 20 percent and prides itself on racial tolerance.

Leasure and Hill Staton got almost the same number of votes in winning Columbia, but it was Leasure and District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman who won the vote countywide.

"Unfortunately, racism is an inescapable conclusion," said Lin Eagan, the sitting judges' campaign chairwoman. "Donna is a class act. She made a superb judge with her wisdom, integrity and strength. I'm so disappointed Howard County didn't give her the opportunity to continue."

But Del. Robert L. Flanagan, an Ellicott City Republican, was among several supporters of the challengers who said race was not a decisive factor in the election. He and others said Leasure and Gelfman had the best reputations among the three judges running.

"There are some people who voted for Donna Hill Staton because of her race, and there may well have been people who voted against her because of her race. I think either is unfortunate," Flanagan said. "I think it probably was a wash."

Race haunted the election from the day Gov. Parris N. Glendening called for more diversity on the bench. First he rejected a list of proposed judges. Then, last October, he appointed Hill Staton -- an African-American -- and Leasure to what was long an exclusively white, male Circuit Court.

The challengers, Gelfman and attorney Jonathan Scott Smith, charged Glendening with putting his quest for diversity above qualifications.

Starting today, Howard's Board of Elections will begin counting about 5,400 absentee ballots from the election.

But few in the local political community give Hill Staton much chance to overcome Gelfman, who finished second behind Leasure and 1,604 votes ahead of Hill Staton. Smith, an attorney who used aggressive tactics, came in fourth.

Hill Staton, resting at home yesterday on a planned day off, shied away from pinning her loss on racism. She also held open the possibility that the absentee votes would change the results.

"I'm proud that I received 40,000 votes from people who were more focused on issues like performance and experience than on the peripheral issues brought up by the challengers," Hill Staton said. "I can honestly walk away from this and say that I conducted myself with dignity."

Gelfman and Smith won in the more conservative parts of the county, Ellicott City, Elkridge and western Howard. Leasure and Hill Staton won in Columbia, a Democratic bastion responsible for 41 percent of the votes.

The fast-growing North Laurel-Savage area -- a politically unpredictable area with many newcomers focused more on Washington rather than on Baltimore -- emerged as the bellwether, supporting Gelfman and Leasure.

But voting patterns show that many voters split the two tickets. Gelfman typically led her running mate Smith by four percentage points or more. Leasure led Hill Staton by two percentage points everywhere but Columbia, where the ticket polled almost evenly.

Few observers were surprised by the split between Gelfman and Smith, who have very different backgrounds and personalities.

But the 2,000-vote difference in support between Leasure and Hill Staton -- who ran identical campaigns and rarely appeared apart -- convinced some that race was the decisive factor.

"This has got everything to do with racial voting patterns," said Brad Coker, a nationally known pollster based in Columbia. "It's a constant, election after election, in this county."

The last time an African-American won a countywide election was 1982, when Councilman C. Vernon Gray first won his seat, and William Manning became a member of the school board.

Gray is still on the council, but Howard has changed to councilmanic districts, meaning Gray now represents an east Columbia district, not the entire county. Manning lost his seat on the school board -- a countywide election -- in 1988.

Delroy L. Cornick, president of the county's African American Republican Club, which endorsed the sitting judges, lost in his races for school board in 1992 and 1994. "The record in Howard County has been pretty dismal," Cornick said.

Ethel Hill, mother of Donna Hill Staton, lost elections to the school board in 1978 and 1980. In 1994, she ran to become a state delegate from a district representing west Columbia and parts of Ellicott City but lost in the Democratic primary.

"I had a lot of support in Columbia. But the experience of African-American candidates in Howard County is, the farther away they get from Columbia, the less support they have," Hill said.

In part because of that history, the issue of race rarely fell below the surface in the campaign -- a yearlong struggle believed to have been as contentious and expensive as any judicial election in Maryland.

Less than two weeks before the election, supporters of Leasure and Hill Staton called a news conference to accuse the challengers of distributing racist literature -- a charge vigorously disputed by the challengers.

The literature featured the pictures of Hill Staton and Gray, the councilman, on the same page. It also showed the pictures of Glendening and Leasure on other, separate pages.

"It is possible for African-Americans to be elected in Howard County -- when they are in a fair fight," said Councilman Dennis R. Schrader, a North Laurel Republican and an organizer of the news conference. "What happened here is that Lenore Gelfman politically knifed Donna Hill Staton. Gelfman understood the race card and she played it."

But Flanagan said the campaign made no appeal on the basis of race: "That kind of overblown rhetoric really is inappropriate. The election is over, and it's time for the community to begin healing."

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