

The Sun

**Three judges take day off at end of venomous race
Hill Staton's apparent loss leads to bittersweet mood**

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The day after the end of the yearlong, hard-fought Howard County judicial election campaign, the chambers of Circuit Judges Diane O. Leasure and Donna Hill Staton and District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman were dark, their courtrooms were empty. All three took the day off.

Although many courthouse insiders yesterday were reluctant to consider the tight race over until more than 5,000 absentee ballots are counted, Gelfman is likely to rise to the Circuit Court bench -- ousting Hill Staton, the county's first African-American judge.

The mood around the courthouse yesterday was bittersweet. Some praised Gelfman's skills but mourned Hill Staton's probable removal from the bench.

"It's not what we gained, it's what we lost," said Circuit Judge Dennis M. Sweeney of Hill Staton's likely departure. "It's just really distressing that such an able person, who has done such an excellent job, won't be allowed to continue if the results" remain the same.

Gelfman's probable win means yet another opening on the four-judge District Court bench -- already short-handed since Judge R. Russell Sadler retired this fall.

A list of seven candidates for the first seat was sent to Gov. Parris N. Glendening in September and immediately prompted objections from a minority coalition since the list contained just one African-American, Assistant State Attorney General Pamila Junette Brown, and one other woman.

A Glendening spokesman said before the election that he could not predict when the District Court appointment would be made. The governor is likely to feel increased pressure to select an African-American for that opening or the opening created by Gelfman's apparent departure.

Courthouse insiders yesterday tossed around the possibility that Hill Staton could gain enough absentee votes to surpass Gelfman, who led her by about 1,600 votes.

Sitting in her office on the ground floor of the courthouse, Margaret D. Rappaport, the clerk of the Circuit Court, put on her glasses and pulled the newspaper closer -- to do some math.

Rappaport, a Republican, did not publicly support either ticket in the race, but her husband, Paul, a former lieutenant governor candidate, supported Gelfman and Gelfman's running mate, attorney Jonathan Scott Smith.

"Let's figure the numbers," Rappaport said, allotting additional figures to each candidate and then deciding Hill Staton was too far behind to beat Gelfman.

But some clung still to the hope that Hill Staton could pull ahead.

"We've still got 5,500 absentee ballots. That's what I am praying for," said Steven T. Merson, the court's jury commissioner, whose wife is Leasure's secretary.

For many around the courthouse, the results were not a surprise. The courthouse buzz for weeks before the election predicted that Gelfman and Leasure would win. "It turned out exactly the way we all thought, didn't it?" asked Timothy G. Wolf, an Ellicott City

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defense attorney who supported the split ticket of Gelfman and Leasure.

Even after the results of the election are final, insiders predict the venom of the election will linger, as women who were once opponents will now be colleagues.

"You can't have these things being said without having some period of time to work through these accusations and charges," Sweeney said, holding a Gelfman-Smith flier that accused Leasure and Hill Staton of being soft on crime. But, he said, the most significant impact of the election is not on the courthouse, but on the county's African-American community, which saw the historic appointment of a black judge swept aside by the electorate.

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Caption:
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Caption: Donna Hill Staton trails Lenore Gelfman by about 1,600 votes.

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