

The Sun

**Clark sworn as judge in District Court
She becomes first African-American on district bench
'Never too late to dream'
Emotional ceremony a step in healing racial divisions**

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Howard County's first African-American District Court judge was sworn in yesterday in an emotional ceremony that was an important step in healing the racial divisions left by last year's judicial election.

Alice Gail Pollard Clark, 57, an assistant public defender in Howard County for the past seven years, was appointed to the post last month by Gov. Parris N. Glendening, who has made diversifying Maryland's judiciary a goal of his tenure.

Clark is replacing former District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman, who rose to the Circuit Court after last fall's hotly contested judicial election that ousted the county's first black circuit judge -- Donna Hill Staton, who also spoke at the ceremony.

Race was a consistent, divisive issue in that election, but it provided a unifying theme to yesterday's ceremony that made Clark the only African-American among the county's eight circuit and district judges.

"I'm so very proud to be the first African-American appointed to the District Court of Howard County," Clark, a resident of West Columbia, said tearfully during the ceremony.

She was joined by members of the legal community who were all smiles -- judges, attorneys and elected officials publicly affirming Clark's selection.

"The process of reaching this pinnacle has been long and arduous," she said, recounting that she was in her late 30s before entering law school. "It's never too late to dream."

Clark's appointment lays to rest controversy over the racial makeup of the county bench, said Democratic state Del. Frank S. Turner, one of a few speakers at the ceremony who praised Glendening for choosing Clark.

Glendening's diversity philosophy for the state's benches led to a bitter battle in the election for Howard's Circuit Court judges last year when opponents challenged Glendening's appointments of Hill Staton and Judge Diane O. Leasure, saying the governor had traded quality for diversity.

Leasure won the election in November, but Hill Staton came in third. As the second-leading vote-getter, Gelfman assumed her seat on the Circuit Court. Gelfman and Leasure attend yesterday's ceremony, though neither spoke.

"The governor has shown his commitment by making diversity an issue throughout the state of Maryland," said Turner, who lobbied Glendening on Clark's behalf. "I only talked about Gail Clark for three months {during the General Assembly session}. That was my message to him."

Clark, who will serve for 10 years, has long been considered the front-runner for the position. But her appointment represents a clear victory for the county's African-American advocates who were stung by the loss of Hill Staton, now a state deputy attorney general.

The Rev. Robert A. F. Turner, head of the county's African American Coalition -- which represents 50 area groups -- said his group now faces the daunting task of pushing to elect an African-American to a countywide position, preferably County Councilman C. Vernon Gray, a Democrat, as county executive.

Between now and next year's election, Turner said the group plans voter education and mobilization programs.

"We have to get African-Americans out to vote," Robert Turner said. "And we have to help the white community open its mind to electing people of color."

Said Gray: "I've been on the County Council for 15 years. I have a record and I've served people well. I want voters to look at that. Being a super-qualified candidate is the process that worked for Gail Clark."

All the other candidates expected in the county executive race -- including county Councilmen Charles C. Feaga, Dennis R. Schrader, both Republicans, and former state Sen. Thomas M. Yeager, a Democrat -- are white.

Yesterday, Clark's peers within the legal community confirmed her qualifications and praised her deep roots in Howard County and her intelligence, integrity and temperament.

"Gail is a symbol of progress. Because of her success, a once invisible community has become visible," Hill Staton said.

Clark grew up in Washington and graduated from the University of Maryland School of Law in 1982. Before becoming a public defender in 1990, she had a private practice in Columbia.

Clark was a guidance counselor and department head for the District of Columbia Board of Education from 1970 to 1982. For eight years before that, she was a science teacher in District of Columbia public schools.

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Caption:
PHOTO

Caption: Historic oath: Alice Gail Pollard Clark is sworn in as District Court judge by Margaret D. Rappaport as Clark's mother, Elizabeth Pollard, looks on.

Credit: GENE SWEENEY JR. : SUN STAFF

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