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The Baltimore Sun

May 23, 1997, Friday, HOWARD EDITION

SECTION: LOCAL (NEWS), Pg. 1B

LENGTH: 823 words

HEADLINE: Clark named to District Court bench; She will become 1st African-American to serve in post; 'Important step forward'; Her appointment viewed as a victory for black advocates

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BODY:

Alice Gail Pollard Clark was named Howard County's first African-American District Court judge yesterday, appointed to the post by Gov. Parris N. Glendening.

Clark, 57, who has been an assistant public defender in Howard County for the past seven years, will fill the slot vacant since former District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman rose to the Circuit Court after a hotly contested judicial election last fall.

Clark was one of three judges named by Glendening yesterday: In Anne Arundel County, District Court Judge Michael E. Loney, 57, was elevated to the Circuit Court, as was Prince George's County District Court Judge Theresa A. Nolan, 66.

Yesterday, Clark, a resident of West Columbia, said she was looking forward to sitting on the bench that has only recently seen its four seats filled by anyone other than a white male. There are no blacks among the county's eight other Circuit and District Court judges.

"I think it is another important step forward for women as well as African-American minorities," Clark said. "I feel grateful I got so much support from so many people in the community."

Clark, who expects to be sworn in for her 10-year term within the next 15 days, 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 Judge Donna Hill Staton -- the county's first black Circuit judge -- in last year's contentious election.

"We are now back to a diverse judicial system in Howard County," said Sherman Howell, a vice president of the county's African American Coalition, which represents 50 area groups. Clark's appointment "repairs a bridge of expectation. We expected to have Judge Hill Staton and we lost her. Now we have Gail. This moves us forward again."

Del. Frank S. Turner, an East Columbia Democrat who recommended Clark for the job, said Clark's appointment places a role model for local children in the courthouse.

"The 50,000 or 60,000 children in this county will see that anyone who works hard and achieves can be rewarded," Turner said. "I think she will be an excellent judge and deserves the admiration of the entire community."

Glendening has made diversifying Maryland's judiciary a goal of his tenure. That philosophy 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, who had been the first woman judge in Howard, assumed her seat on the Circuit Court bench. Hill Staton is now a deputy attorney general.

In a prepared statement yesterday, Glendening said Clark had the "obvious ability and experience to become an excellent judge."

Glendening also praised Clark's community involvement and said he was "delighted" to appoint an African-American to the bench.

Clark's "spirit of community involvement makes her particularly well-suited to the District Court, which is normally the only contact most people experience with the judicial system," Glendening said. "It is essential that Maryland's judiciary be open to every qualified person from every segment of our community."

Much of the criticism of Glendening's Circuit Court appointments centered on the governor's choice of judges whose prior legal practice had been outside the county and were not well-known in the community.

Clark has deep roots in Howard County and the support of the Howard County Bar Association. When the bar association's judicial selection committee -- which essentially serves as a guide for bar members -- reviewed the applicants for the vacant judgeship, Clark received nine votes of "highly recommend," more than any of the other nine applicants.

Judge James N. Vaughan, administrative judge of the District Court, urged Clark to apply for the position, Clark said.

"I think it's wonderful to have [Gail] on the bench," Vaughan said yesterday. "It fills out our complement [of judges]. I think a great deal of her as an attorney. There were some good people on the list [of candidates], but she was one of the best. She cares."

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.

Becoming a judge after years as an attorney will give her a different perspective on the courtroom.

"I am certainly looking forward to sitting on the bench and seeing it from the other side," she said.

Pub Date: 5/23/97

LOAD-DATE: May 24, 1997