

Judge retires to assist in family court

Jacobson to help feuding parties reach agreements

By Sheridan Lyons
Sun Staff Writer

Although Leonard S. Jacobson retired early from the Baltimore County Circuit Court, he wants to quash rumors that he's dying — or running for county executive.

Instead, the gregarious judge said, he was tempted off the bench three years before mandatory retirement to serve as a special master in the Family Law Settlement Court, helping parties entangled in divorce and custody cases work out their differences without a trial.

It's the kind of grueling, difficult work many jurists dislike, but Judge Jacobson said he was always drawn to it.

"The reason that the bench accepted me for this job is because I did fairly well with family law cases, resolving them with minimum animosity," he said.

His approach: "Convincing people that if the marriage is over, that they ought to plan what their future ought to be and the future of their children . . . rather than have a stranger who wears a black robe do it for them. It sets the stage for talking in a sane way."

While administrators and lawyers in domestic cases welcomed his arrival, criminal defense attorneys and prosecutors alike lamented Judge Jacobson's departure.

"He was a very good judge to be in front of, and very fair to both sides," said Assistant State's Attorney Robert A. Brocato. "A true gentleman."

"The thing I enjoyed most about practicing before him," said Assistant Public Defender Rodney C. Warren, "is I always felt obliged to do my very best . . . I always felt intellectually challenged. He was fair to both sides — and just basically a nice guy."

Judge Jacobson said the hardest cases in his years on the bench involved the death penalty: "Personally, I'm not in favor of the death penalty, although I would have imposed it if called on legally as a judge." Fortunately, he said, the four capital cases he tried did not, in the end, meet the legal requirements for capital punishment.

Drugs, he said, were the biggest problem he saw, affecting "95 percent of what I did in criminal trials, [including] alcohol — the legal drug."

While he said he wouldn't legalize drug use, "I do favor treating it as a health problem. I don't know how, but we can't continue to put addicts in jail any more. We don't have room

JUDICIAL CANDIDATES

Three District Court judges and four lawyers have been recommended for a Baltimore County Circuit Court judgeship to fill the seat vacated by the retirement of Leonard S. Jacobson.

The Trial Courts Judicial Nominating Commission for Commission District 3 sent the list last week to Gov. William Donald Schaefer, who is expected to name the new judge in about two months. A Circuit Court judge must run for a full 15-year term in the first statewide election occurring at least a year after the gubernatorial appointment.

Already in the pool of prospective circuit judges because their names had been approved as candidates for a previous vacancy were District Court Judges A. Gordon Boone Jr. and Michael Lee McCampbell. District Judge G. Darryl Russell Jr. was added for this vacancy.

The lawyers recommended to the governor were Robert E. Cadigan, J. Calvin "Nip" Jenkins Jr. and Kathleen G. Cox. Added to this group was Russell J. White.

Also vacant is a District Court judgeship, created when Lawrence R. Daniels was elevated to the Circuit Court in November.

Candidates for the District Court seat are Assistant Public Defender Sally C. Chester; attorney Darryl Glenn Fletcher; Arnold E. Jablon, county zoning administrator; attorney Bruce Sewell Lamdin; Deputy State's Attorney Sue A. Schenning; attorney Louis J. Weinkam Sr.; and Assistant State's Attorney Alexandra N. "Sandy" Williams.

for them, and we can't do anything for them."

Judge Jacobson's departure last month, just shy of his 67th birthday and three years short of mandatory retirement at 70, sparked more than a little speculation. "People were calling me and saying, 'Are you OK?' I'm in good health," he said.

The political rumor began when he joked about running for executive at lunch one day at the lawyers' table in the Towson House eatery. Apparently, someone overheard and took him seriously.

"I retired from politics a long time ago," he said with a laugh.

He served in the Maryland House of Delegates from 1966 until 1971, when he lost a state Senate race to a friend, Melvin A. "Mickey" Steinberg, now the lieutenant governor. He served as the county attorney from 1979 until he was appointed to the bench in 1983.

Circuit Judge John F. Fader II, one of Judge Jacobson's closest friends on the bench, said the new position in the settlement court — where special masters make recommendations and try to resolve civil cases without a trial — fits him perfectly.

"The fact of the matter is, I would say most judges don't really want to take more than their share of domestic work. It is certainly a heart-wrenching situation, especially with child custody. Lenny doesn't look at it that way. He looks not only to settle the case, but to make people's lives better. He attacks and goes at it with an enthusiasm that he is going to try to make people happy, to help those children."

Judge Jacobson also registered last month as a private arbitrator, or



PERRY THORSVIK/SUN STAFF PHOTO

Leonard S. Jacobson was a Baltimore County circuit judge.

what he calls "a rent-a-judge," who recommends settlements in civil cases when the parties want to avoid a full trial.

Born and reared above his late father's grocery store on Harford Road, Judge Jacobson served in the merchant marine and worked in a truck-rental business before deciding on law school, graduating third in his class at the University of Baltimore.

He loves to fish in his 20-foot "Mo-by Jake" and has been active in the theater since Hamilton Junior High School.

Shows he's written for the bar association include "Best Little Court-house," "Hillen Street Blues" and "T'sorus Line," from a Yiddish expression for trouble.