

Raker Appointment Cheered

Chief Judge Calls Her a Worthy Successor to First Woman on Court

BY PATTY REINERT

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While Gov. William Donald Schaefer's aides insist gender played no role in the nomination of Judge Irma S. Raker to the state's highest court, women's groups celebrated the appointment yesterday as a victory that has been at least a decade in the making.

"We're thrilled," said Susan Souder, president of the 1,000-member Women's Bar Association of Maryland.

"Beyond the fact that she's highly qualified for the position, we're particularly thrilled because she has been a real role model and a mentor for other women lawyers," said Souder, a partner at Baltimore's Gordon, Feinblatt, Rothman, Hoffberger & Hollander.

"It's important to the state of Maryland that all of its benches be diverse and represent all citizens of the state," she added. "We've been working for years to encourage women lawyers to

apply for judgeships and get involved in the selection process, so this is very encouraging."

Schaefer appointed Raker, a Montgomery County Circuit Court judge, over the Thanksgiving holiday. If confirmed by the state Senate, she will succeed Court of Appeals Judge John F. McAuliffe, who intends to retire by the end of the year.

The governor also elevated Baltimore County District Judge Lawrence R. Daniels to that county's circuit bench, and appointed former State's Attorney Ralph M. Burnett to a seat on the Garrett County District Court.

Raker, who is a former assistant state's attorney, served on the Montgomery County District Court from 1980 until she was elevated to the circuit bench in 1982.

She was selected for the appellate court over two other finalists — University of Maryland Law School Professor Roger C. Wolf and Allegany County Circuit Judge J. Frederick Sharer.

Schaefer accepted the short list of finalists after advertising

JUDGE IRMA S. RAKER

Education: American University's Washington College of Law 1972

Judicial Experience: Montgomery County District Court 1980-82; Circuit Court 1982-present

Legal Experience: Partner, Sachs, Greenebaum and Taylor 1979-80; Assistant State's Attorney 1973-79

for the position three times in an effort to attract more applicants. Once the list was narrowed to three, lawyers familiar with Schaefer's judicial selections predicted he would choose Raker because of her extensive judicial experience and the fact that the court had no women judges.

The only other woman to serve on the court was Judge Rita C. Davidson, who died in 1984. For years, lawyers had predicted the eventual elevation of former Court of Special Appeals Judge Roslyn B. Bell to the high court, but the state's mandatory retirement law forced her out be-

Raker

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fore a position opened.

Robert A. Pascal, Schaefer's appointments secretary, said yesterday the governor does not select judges "on the basis of gender or color."

Pascal said the appointment came largely because of the broad and enthusiastic support Raker received from various lawyers groups, including the Maryland Association of Defense Trial Counsel, the Women's Bar Association of Maryland and the J. Franklin Bourne Bar Association, and from the impression she made during a personal session with the governor.

"The governor interviews everybody," Pascal said. "Obviously she did well."

Raker was on the bench all day yesterday and could not be reached to comment on her appointment.

But Court of Appeals Chief Judge Robert C. Murphy praised the nomination, saying Raker's experience on the district and circuit benches would benefit the court. He also called her a "worthy successor" to Davidson.

"If Rita were alive, she would be ecstatic about this appointment," he said. "In this day of gender equality it's terribly important to have a woman on the court. It brings to the bench a perspective that unless you're a woman you just don't have. Rita was very instrumental in educating us, and I think Judge Raker will do the same. I'm very happy about this appointment."

Rockville lawyer Barry Helfand, who has practiced before Raker, called her "a very, very smart woman" with a "good heart."

"She's full of compassion, but she is firm when she wants to be firm," he said. "She's a great choice because the truth is that no one will ever be able to question her fairness. When you're at the court of last resort, you want to know that beyond any mistake a trial judge makes, the people there will call it the way they see it, and that's what Judge Raker is like. She will call it the way she sees it."

In the Baltimore County appointment, Schaefer chose Daniels to replace Judge Joseph F. Murphy Jr., who was elevated to the Court of Special Appeals last June.

Daniels, 46, has served on the county's district bench since 1989. He will sit on the circuit court until next November's general election, and will then have the option of running for a 15-year term on the court.

The governor also appointed Burnett to succeed Garrett County District Judge Jack R. Turney, who retired in September. Burnett, a partner in the law firm of Burnett, Eiswert and Janes, served as state's attorney in the county from 1974 through 1978.