

District Court Appointee to Be County's First Black Woman Judge

By Robert E. Pierre
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Deputy County Attorney Sheila R. Tillerson soon will become the first black woman judge in Prince George's County, after her appointment to the county's District Court last week by Gov. William Donald Schaefer.

Tillerson, 35, fills the seat vacated by Judge Philip Nichols Jr., who was elevated to the Circuit Court. She will be sworn in next month.

"We're long overdue for a black woman judge," said Betty Hughlett, associate general counsel for the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. "Given the [racial] composition of this county, it is critical that we have more minority representation on the bench."

Black residents made up 50.7 percent of the county's 749,000 residents in January 1992, according to the Prince George's County Economic Development Corp.

Tillerson said she is thrilled by her appointment, but has a lot of work to complete before she assumes the \$82,300-a-year post.

"I just haven't had a chance to think about it," Tillerson said. "My focus now is wrapping up my current responsibilities."

As a deputy county attorney since 1988, Tillerson has been responsible for all contracts and procurements for the county and has served as counsel to the Minority Busi-

ness Opportunity Commission. Previously she was an assistant state's attorney, serving as chief of the sexual assault and child abuse unit from 1984 to 1988.

Before that, she worked for the Legal Aid Bureau Inc. as a law clerk in the unit that dealt with domestic law. "Some people treat

domestic violence as though it's not a crime," said Tillerson, who also spent two years on the county's domestic violence advisory council. "But it needs to be handled with dignity, just as any other case that comes before the court."

Tillerson, a Bowie resident, graduated from Morgan State University in 1979 and received a law degree from Howard University in 1982. In 1987, she received a master of laws in taxation from Georgetown University.

In addition to several other professional associations, Tillerson is a past president of the J. Franklyn Borne Bar Association, composed of 200 black lawyers in Prince George's and Montgomery counties.

Hughlett, a friend of Tillerson's, said the appointment is a step in the right direction for the residents of the county.

"Many people in District Court are unrepresented," Hughlett said. "They look to the judge to set the tone and the standard in the courtroom. It's imperative that the judge treat everyone with respect and not talk down to them. Sheila has the patience, temperament and the people skills to accomplish that."