

PG's 1st black woman judge

Tillerson moves to bench June 18

By Laura M. Litvan
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Sheila Tillerson has been unwavering in her interest in the law since the seventh grade, when a lawyer visited her school and spoke about

the profession.

That interest led her down a career path that has included time in Baltimore working on divorce and adoption cases, four years as a Prince George's County prosecutor and five years as the county's deputy attorney.

Her next stop on the path will be historic: On June 18, the 35-year-old Bowie resident will be sworn in as the first black woman to serve on the bench in the county.

Gov. William Donald Schaefer appointed her May 21 to fill a District Court seat left vacant when Judge C. Philip Nichols was elevated to the Circuit Court.

Miss Tillerson doesn't remember the exact words of the lawyer who inspired her during Career Day at Northeast Washington's Bertie Backus Junior High in the early 1970s.

"I just remember seeing a tall

black woman, and she had a resonating voice," said Miss Tillerson. "I don't remember what she said, but whatever she said had an impact. I went home and told my mother, 'I want to be a lawyer.' I never changed my mind."

Her appointment has won praise from the legal community, as well as from many in the county who have felt the appointment of a black female judge in a majority-black county is long overdue.

"I think she brings good skills as a prosecutor and a civil litigator," said Judge Nichols.

"The black women, who are a tremendous force in this county in terms of demographics, are so underrepresented on the bench," said Prince George's County State's Attorney Alex Williams.

Miss Tillerson studied under Mr. Williams in the early 1980s, when he was a law professor at Howard University. He says he remembers her well from his criminal law classes.

"She was clearly above the pack," Mr. Williams said. "She was a superb student — always prepared and intellectually strong."

After she graduated from Howard in 1982, Miss Tillerson went to work for the Legal Aid Bureau Inc. in Baltimore, where she represented clients in divorce and adoption cases.

But she decided to go back to school to get more tax law expertise. As she attended night courses at Georgetown University law school, she took a day job with the State's Attorney's Office in Prince George's. She went through the typical pipeline, first trying cases in District Court, then Juvenile Court and then the Circuit Court.

"The State's Attorney's Office to me was so exciting," she said. "It was a rush. I loved it."

Several lawyers who worked with her said she was generally successful in trying her cases.

"She had a great deal of success with [sex-crime] cases, which we feel are some of the hardest cases to try," said Deputy State's Attorney Deborah Johnston.

"I opposed her in several cases, and I found her to be a formidable opponent," said Assistant Public Defender Elvira White.

Miss Tillerson came to specialize in sex-crime and child-abuse cases. One of her highest profile cases was an attempted rape trial in 1987.

Isaac Gray, then 28, was accused of using a flashing light and identifying himself as a police officer to pull over a woman on a road near Boys Village of Maryland. He tried to rape the woman, who kicked Gray and broke free.

Gray, who had already been convicted of raping a woman in Howard County under similar circumstances, had been tried twice in Prince George's, with each case ending in a mistrial when the jury deadlocked on some charges.

When Miss Tillerson took the case — her first in Circuit Court — she was told by the prosecutor who handed it over that Gray had agreed to plead guilty to a lesser charge and that the deal was probably the best course for her.

But when she arrived in court, Gray stood up and took her by surprise.

"He pleaded not guilty," she said. "He wanted to go to trial."

Miss Tillerson won. Gray's defense revolved around his claim that he pulled over the victim, a blond, white woman, because he thought she was his ex-wife. Miss Tillerson tracked down Gray's ex-wife in North Carolina and persuaded her to testify. Miss Tillerson said this was

probably her most convincing witness because the ex-wife is black and looked nothing like the victim.

Her biggest challenge in that and other cases was to persuade witnesses to trust the court system.

"People basically want to do right, but they don't want the system to leave them hanging," she said.

Eventually, she became chief of the sex crimes and child abuse unit, supervising other lawyers and trying major cases. In 1988, she decided to leave to become deputy county attorney, a position she still holds.

Now in charge of all contracts and purchases by the county, Miss Tillerson has spent considerable time recently on a case involving a dispute over the county's new Hyattsville Justice Center.

The contractor for the center claims the county owes his company \$14 million for work beyond what was originally agreed to. She said she has spent much of her time in recent months embroiled in the case.

As Miss Tillerson looks toward her time on the bench, she is hoping her mix of experience in criminal and civil law will pay off.

"I think the key is that you have the ability to grasp the issues, to have a working knowledge of the law and to be fair in hearing the issues that come before you," she said.

Even before she takes her place on the bench, there is much buzzing in the legal community about who may follow her. Among others, Assistant State's Attorney Beverly Woodard is on a list of eight nominees to be considered when there is another vacancy on the District Court.

And Ms. White, who in 1988 became the first black woman in the county to make a short list of judicial nominees, is weighing a bid for a Circuit Court seat during the 1994 elections. Ms. White had been on a nominations list for vacancies to the Circuit Court, but her name was removed last year, stirring a publicized protest.

Meanwhile, Miss Tillerson ticked off a list of prominent female lawyers who either are already interested in becoming judges, or who she thinks should be.

"You don't have to search long and hard to find people qualified for the bench," she said. "You just have to open your eyes."