

Rasin set to return to bench

District's chief judge will go back to courtroom

By **BRIAN M. SCHLETER**
Staff Writer

Wanting to "make a difference in people's lives," Chief District Court Judge Martha F. Rasin announced yesterday that she's trading in her budgets and legislative agendas to reclaim the trial judge's gavel she left behind five years ago.

But court observers and some lawmakers speculated that rising tensions between the Annapolis resident and her boss, Court of Appeals Chief Judge Robert M. Bell, were a factor in her decision to step down.

Judge Rasin, 53, will make the move back to the District Court in Anne Arundel County on Sept. 17, which would have been her fifth anniversary as chief judge.

"I want to get back to where I can make a difference in people's lives," she said. "I want to have a chance to give people a chance to have faith in the system."

She was a county judge for seven years before becoming only the second chief judge of District Court in 1996. She replaced Robert F. Sweeney, who had held the post since the court was created in 1971. He died in 1999.

Judge Rasin said that when



JUDGE MARTHA RASIN

she took the chief judge position she'd hoped to continue hearing cases. But the job proved too demanding, and she frequently worked 12-hour days just handling the administrative duties.

Judge Rasin informed Judge Bell of her decision over the weekend. He was shocked, he said, but agreed to accept her offer to step down "with deep regret."

"She's been a great leader for that court," he said.

He intends to designate her successor by Sept. 17.

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Court observers, however, said Judge Rasin and Judge Bell frequently clashed over his court administration reforms.

Last week, Judge Bell consolidated District and Circuit Court budget and finance, procurement and contract administration duties, according to an internal court memo obtained by *The Capital*.

A year earlier, personnel functions were combined.

One lawmaker said legislative audits that were critical of court budgets have put pressure on Judge Bell to raise accountability. Judge Rasin bore the brunt of that pressure.

"She's relatively young, and I believe has been beaten down by the administrative end of the District Court. Also by her lack of tenure, her lack of seniority, she is not able to hold onto the independence of the District Court as well as her predecessor," said Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr.

Judge Bell said Judge Rasin is leaving on her own terms.

"Remember, this was her choice. This was not a situation where she was forced out," he said.

Judge Rasin wasn't available to comment this morning on speculation about what prompted her decision.

Michelle Byrnie, a spokesman for Gov. Parris N. Glendening, said Judge Rasin's announcement was a surprise.

"The governor thinks Chief Judge Rasin has done a tremendous job overseeing more than 100 judges and ensuring that the people's court continues to run smoothly and that citizens get fair and balanced treatment," she said.

Judge Rasin said Judge James W. Dryden will retain his title as administrative judge of the two District Court buildings in Annapolis and Glen Burnie.

"I appointed him to that position, and now I'll go to work for him," she said.

The state's 108 District Court judges handled a record 2.1 million new cases in the last fiscal year. The number of filings increased by 4 percent under Judge Rasin's tenure as

chief judge.

Stretching the \$100 million budget to continue to provide services was one of her chief accomplishments, she said.

She's credited with launching a computerized filing pilot program, hiring law clerks for judges and proposing legislation to give domestic violence victims 24-hour access to the court.

Judge Rasin and her staff also initiated several programs to expedite cases and unclog court dockets. She put an end to "cattle call" dockets in which all cases are technically slated to begin at the same time and instituted Alternative Dispute Resolution programs.

While the judge said reforming the system proved rewarding, it couldn't compare to the satisfaction she got when recovered drug addicts and battered women returned to court to thank her.

"It's just as rewarding as getting a piece of legislation passed," she said.

Judge Rasin was appointed to the bench in 1989 by then-governor William Donald Schaefer.

Staff Writer Sara Marsh contributed to this story.

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Correction

The date of the fall Family Concert by the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra was incorrect in The Guidebook calendar of events published in *The Sunday Capital*.

The concert will be held at 2 and 3:30 p.m. Oct. 21 at Maryland Hall for the Creative Arts, 801 Chase St. Call 410-263-0907 for information.

The Capital seeks to provide complete, accurate information and reserves this space daily to correct any mistake, regardless of who is at fault.

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