

Chief judge to quit post

District Court head
plans to return
to Arundel trial duty

Rasin 'was a great leader'

Tenure marked
by disputes, strides
on domestic cases

By DAVID NITKIN
SUN STAFF

Maryland Chief District Judge Martha F. Rasin announced yesterday that she would quit the position and return to Anne Arundel County as a trial judge next month, ending a five-year tenure marked by progress in domestic violence cases and high-profile political clashes over staffing and court reform.

Rasin, 53, said her job overseeing 35 courthouses, 108 judges and 1,500 employees has isolated her from the work she loves.

"I entered the judiciary to be a trial judge on the district court, and that is a wonderful, wonderful job," Rasin said yesterday. "It is very rewarding and very interesting, and I never got tired of it."

Rasin is only the second person to serve as chief district judge, a position she assumed in 1996 after the retirement of Robert F. Sweeney. The job was created in 1970 when voters approved a reform plan designed to end cronyism and increase standards for the local courts, which hear civil claims of up to \$25,000, traffic violations and some criminal matters.

"She was a great leader in the court and one of my senior advisers," said Court of Appeals Chief Judge Robert M. Bell, the state's ranking judge. "We're going to miss her."

Bell said he intends to name Rasin's replacement before the resignation takes effect Sept. 17.

Court observers have speculated that tension between Bell and Rasin may have contributed to her decision. Last week, Bell announced a plan to consolidate the circuit and district court systems' budget, finance and purchasing offices. A year earlier, personnel functions were combined. Before that, Bell and Rasin dis-

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agreed over who should be named administrative judge of Baltimore District Court.

Both judges denied yesterday that friction between them caused Rasin to resign. "I'm not doing this to get out of or away from [something]," Rasin said. "I'm doing it to keep my eye on my own goals."

Added Bell: "It has nothing to do with any strained relationships between she and I."

Rasin was named chief district judge — one of the state's top three judicial positions — by Bell's predecessor, Robert C. Murphy. The appointment capped a rapid ascent in the Maryland legal world.

She had been a judge for seven years at the time, and came to the legal profession later than many — graduating from the University of Baltimore Law School at age 33. But two of her cousins had been judges, and she had demonstrated a knack for impressing the right people. Before law school, she worked for then-Maryland Senate President Steny H. Hoyer, now a congressman. As a young lawyer, she partnered with Bruce C. Bereano, a top State House lobbyist, before starting her own firm.

Rasin testified on Bereano's behalf in 1999 when the lobbyist was fighting to preserve his law license after a mail-fraud conviction.

"It would be a tall order for anyone to have followed the exceptional service of Bob Sweeney as the original chief judge," Bereano said. "She was just an excellent ... person to step into that transition role — by her caring and being so passionate about the district court and her judges and personnel."

Joseph F. Murphy Jr., chief judge of the Court of Special Appeals, credited Rasin with strengthening alternative dispute resolution programs and tightening administrative procedures. "I think she really did a great job," he said. "She didn't just stand pat on what Bob Sweeney had accomplished."

Rasin said she is proud of strides made in handling domestic violence cases, creating specialized clerks and developing a system that allows different trial courts to work together. But she also found herself fighting political battles she never anticipated. Rasin opposed a plan by Baltimore public safety officials to place a judge in a city



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Resigning: Chief District Judge Martha F. Rasin, shown in 1999, plans to leave her post Sept. 17.

jail courtroom to handle minor cases rapidly, but relented under three years of pressure.

"It got to a point where it was very difficult, very personal and very distracting," Rasin said. "I felt very strongly that my choice was the right thing to do, but I felt myself up against a political wall."

Last year, she became the target of criticism from Mayor Martin O'Malley, who accused her of blocking efforts for criminal justice reform. After judges said they didn't understand O'Malley's ideas, the mayor sent a report with stick-figure drawings to illustrate his plan. Rasin wasn't amused.

"I think I just got a couple of big whacks," Rasin said yesterday. "But you move on. I look back on that as having learned a lot, and as I go out I have better relationships. And I hope I can help my successor transfer into those relationships so that that kind of thing doesn't happen again."

Said John H. Lewin Jr., former coordinator for the city's Criminal Justice Coordinating Council: "There are just so many battles a warrior can endure, and she endured her fair share. Whether she is correct or not, she has her own self-determination, and she fights for what she thinks is the best way to go."

Sun staff writer Caitlin Francke contributed to this article.