

The Sun

**Judges say foes' attacks cause `disrespect' for bench
Gelfman calls their ad `slap' at District Court
CAMPAIGN 1996**

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After months of letting the challengers in Howard County's Circuit Court race largely control the agenda, sitting Judges Diane O. Leasure and Donna Hill Staton hit back at their opponents yesterday during a Columbia debate.

Hill Staton led the charge, criticizing the challengers, District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman and attorney Jonathan Scott Smith, for running a campaign that Hill Staton said has brought "disrespect to the office."

She singled out Smith's comments during the primary campaign in the spring in which he called Leasure and Hill Staton "judges on training wheels" and "sitting ducks."

Said Hill Staton: "When all is said and done, we must all have a stake in having a judiciary which has the respect of the community and does not become a laughingstock because somebody thought it was the funny thing to do or the convenient thing to do in order to reach their own political goals."

Gelfman responded by criticizing an ad by Leasure and Hill Staton that called District Court, where Gelfman has had all of her judicial experience, "traffic court."

"I took great offense when the opponents delivered a slap to the District Court, demeaning the District Court, relegating the District Court to `traffic court,'" Gelfman said. "That was not just an attack on me, although that was the point of it. It was an attack on my colleagues."

The debate, at the Board of Education headquarters on Route 108 in Columbia, was sponsored by Howard County chapters of the League of Women Voters, the American Association of University Women and the National Council of Jewish Women.

Since Gov. Parris N. Glendening appointed Leasure and Hill Staton to the court last fall, the battle for their seats has been intense, bitter and divisive.

The tactics and rhetoric of the campaign have drawn far more attention than the courtroom issues, although Smith and Gelfman have turned the focus of the race to crime lately.

In yesterday's debate, representatives from each of the sponsoring groups questioned the candidates. Many focused on legal matters of docket management, jury instructions and court rules.

The candidates disagreed little until the subject turned to crime, sentencing and the conduct of the candidates in the campaign.

Responding to a question about creative sentencing, Smith said he would impose sentences that would teach criminals lessons about their crimes.

He suggested that a convenience store robber could work without pay for the store owner, that a burglar could help build a house, or that a thief could wear a shirt saying, "I'm a thief," while picking up trash along U.S. 40.

"Too many people come into court and try to excuse their criminal behavior," Smith said. "Punishment should fit the crime."

Later, he said, "The defining issue in this campaign is the explosion of violent crime in our community and what we're going to do

about it. I'll work hard to serve you, but I'll also work hard to protect you."

Leasure and Hill Staton, who as judges are bound by ethical rules prohibiting them from talking about most legal or political issues, made a point of responding to the crime issue raised by Smith.

Both judges said they were concerned about crime and that they see its results in their courtrooms, but they disputed Smith's contention that the issue is the heart of the election.

"This is a hot-button issue," said Hill Staton. "This is what the people like to hear, but I ask you to look beyond the rhetoric and think about what really is the role of a judge and what is it people like to see in a judge."

Later, Leasure said, "I think the defining issue of the campaign is experience and integrity. Judges do not have any control over the crime rate."

The League of Women Voters will hold a debate between the two candidates for the Howard County school board, Jane Schuchardt and Francine Wishnick, at 7: 30 p.m. tomorrow at the Department of Education Building in Columbia.

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