

The Sun

**Race questions linger in Howard election
Voters apparently reject county's first black judge
ELECTION 1996**

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The battle for two seats on Howard County's Circuit Court is over -- with absentee ballots unlikely to change the outcome -- but voters' apparent rejection of the county's first black judge has left questions as bitter as the campaign itself.

The day after the vote, the two camps debated whether the narrow defeat of Donna Hill Staton turned on issues of race.

A Sun analysis of poll results showed that Hill Staton trailed her running mate, Diane O. Leasure, by about 2 percentage points everywhere but in Columbia, which has an African-American population of about 20 percent and prides itself on racial tolerance.

Leasure and Hill Staton got almost the same number of votes in winning Columbia, but it was Leasure and District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman who won the vote countywide.

"Unfortunately, racism is an inescapable conclusion," said Lin Eagan, the sitting judges' campaign chairwoman. "Donna is a class act. She made a superb judge with her wisdom, integrity and strength. I'm so disappointed Howard County didn't give her the opportunity to continue."

But Del. Robert L. Flanagan, an Ellicott City Republican, was among several supporters of the challengers who said race was not a decisive factor in the election. He and others said Leasure and Gelfman had the best reputations among the three judges running.

"There are some people who voted for Donna Hill Staton because of her race, and there may well have been people who voted against her because of her race. I think either is unfortunate," Flanagan said.

Race had haunted the election from the day Gov. Parris N. Glendening called for more diversity on the bench. First he rejected a list of proposed judges. Then, last October, he appointed Hill Staton -- an African-American -- and Leasure to what was long an exclusively white, male Circuit Court.

Two challengers, Gelfman and attorney Jonathan Scott Smith, quickly joined the battle, charging Glendening with putting his quest for diversity above qualifications.

Starting today, Howard's Board of Elections will begin counting about 5,400 absentee ballots from the election.

But few in the local political community give Hill Staton much chance to overcome Gelfman, who finished second behind Leasure and 1,604 votes ahead of Hill Staton. Smith, an attorney whose aggressive tactics turned off some voters, came in a distant fourth.

Hill Staton shied away yesterday from pinning her loss on racism. She also held open the possibility that the absentee votes would change the results.

"I'm proud that I received 40,000 votes from people who were more focused on issues like performance and experience than on the peripheral issues brought up by the challengers," Hill Staton said.

Gelfman and Smith won in the more conservative parts of the county, Ellicott City, Elkridge and western Howard. Leasure and

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Hill Staton won in Columbia, a Democratic bastion responsible for 41 percent of the votes cast.

The fast-growing North Laurel-Savage area -- with many newcomers focused more on Washington rather than Baltimore -- emerged as the bellwether, supporting Gelfman and **Leasure**.

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