



ALGERINA PERNA: SUN STAFF

**New:** *Karen Murphy Jensen will find out the true meaning of being a circuit judge because much traveling will be required to avoid cases handled by her husband or prosecutors from the Caroline state's attorney's staff.*

# Denton OK with wife of prosecutor as judge

## Shore assignments to be rotated to avoid conflicts with cases

By CHRIS GUY  
SUN STAFF

DENTON — The Caroline County seat is one of those small towns where just about everybody knows everybody, where the florist and dry cleaners are a short stroll down tree-lined brick sidewalks, where most of the parking meters still take only dimes and nickels.

Denton is also a town where prominent families often hold key business or civic jobs for generations. It's a town where the appointment of the wife of Caroline's state's attorney as a Circuit Court judge has caused hardly a ripple.

In the next month or so, Karen Murphy Jensen will take over as the only female trial judge on the Eastern Shore, a position that will require some deft scheduling

and a lot of traveling to avoid criminal cases handled by her husband, Christian J. Jensen, or his prosecutors.

"It's a little unusual," says Jensen, 44, who grew up in Towson. "I don't think there's ever been a husband and wife situation like this, but it's not unworkable. I'll just be like the old-time circuit rider, I'll get in my car and go. Fortunately, I've lived here so long I know all the back roads."

Jensen, who set up practice in Denton after her marriage in 1983, will handle civil cases and routine matters such as issuing warrants requested by police. But when it comes to criminal cases, she will be replaced by retired judges or swap duties with six other judges in the 2nd Judicial Circuit, which also includes Cecil, Kent, Queen Anne's and Talbot counties.

Last year, the state's attorney's office handled more than 2,000 cases, although three-quarters were heard in District Court.

"Karen [See Judge, 10B]

# Denton is OK with wife of prosecutor as new judge

[Judge, from Page 1B]

Murphy Jensen has excellent credentials," says Gov. Parris N. Glendening. "She's highly respected by her peers. She's simply the most qualified person for the job."

His staff researched the issue of conflict and found precedent for the hiring, and ample options for scheduling other judges to handle the criminal caseload in Caroline County, says Michelle Byrnie, Glendening's deputy press secretary.

Administrative Judge William S. Horne says shuffling judges in the Middle and Upper Shore isn't new.

"We're already using retired judges to handle a lot of cases, and if there aren't any available, we'll assign another judge from within the circuit," Horne says. "That's why they were called circuit courts in the first place."

A quarter-century ago, brothers served simultaneously as judge and prosecutor in Queen Anne's County and in Southern Maryland a husband and wife once served as District and Circuit Court judges at the same time.

And nearly 30 years ago in Caroline, Judge James Wise was named to the bench when his son, J. Owen Wise, was the chief prosecutor. The younger Wise, who succeeded his father on the bench in 1982, retired in January, opening the spot for Jensen.

"I'm sure this will all work out fine," says Wise, whose recently dry-cleaned judicial robes are hanging in the courthouse office Jensen will soon occupy. "In fact, I fully plan to work part-time in retirement, so it's very likely I'll be hearing cases right here."

If there's any grouching about Jensen's appointment, it's not likely to be heard along Denton's Market Street or around the sycamore-lined courthouse square.

Robert A. Thornton Jr. is a lawyer and former House of Delegates member whose name was one of three submitted with Jensen's by a judicial nominating committee. He wonders if a growing caseload might make scheduling more of a problem.

"Caroline hasn't felt the explosion of growth that some other areas have, but you know we will,"

Thornton says. "But I think anybody who has a negative reaction to this will very quickly be won over by Karen."

Jensen, the eldest child of Judge Robert C. Murphy, who retired in 1996 as chief judge of the state's highest court, has built her practice in a 115-year-old bank building. Her office is decorated with painted furniture and includes piles of toys and books to entertain clients' children.

Years of handling civil and domestic cases and representing municipal governments and social service agencies leave her well-prepared for the bench, says Jensen, the mother of sons 11 and 9.

"I'm not any legal scholar, but I think I have an immense amount of common sense," she says. "I've worked a lot with abused women, I'm a mother balancing running a business with raising a family. The night I heard about [the appointment], I went home, cooked supper and helped with homework."

Her prosecutor husband echoes Jensen's sentiments.

"I couldn't be more delighted for her and I'm certainly going to do all I can to make this work," he says. "She's sort of had the best of both worlds, between her practice and being married to someone who's immersed in the criminal side. I think that gives her a very balanced perspective."

Jensen says her biggest problem before she is sworn in will be finding other lawyers to pick up her caseload, which includes work for private clients, the county Department of Social Services and the town of Denton.

She's sitting in on an architectural committee charged with renovating and adding a second courtroom to Caroline's brick 1895 courthouse.

Outgoing by nature, Jensen acknowledges worrying that the judgeship will alter the open, friendly relationship and easy banter she enjoys with Market Street merchants, friends and clients.

"I hope and pray my life isn't going to change so much people won't come up and talk," Jensen says. "A certain dignity does go with the job, but I hope my personality will keep me from getting isolated. I love living here; I love raising my children here."