

# Few can put a name to that familiar face

■ **Judge:** *Despite the bailiff's announcement of the Hon. Catherine Curran O'Malley's arrival, most people in Courtroom 1 didn't seem to have any idea who she was.*

By SARAH KOENIG  
SUN STAFF

The bailiff instructed everyone in Courtroom 1 to rise as he loudly announced the arrival of the Hon. Catherine Curran O'Malley. Then, her black robe fastened and her docket in hand, Baltimore's first lady strode onto the bench.

No one seemed to have any idea who she was. The bailiff's enunciation wasn't the best, and two people had been dozing.

"Oh my, is that who she is?" Marylynn Lynch said, laughing, when later told it



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**Preparation:** *Catherine Curran O'Malley looks over files in her office before entering the courtroom on her first official day as District Court judge.*

was the mayor's wife who had extended a protective order against Lynch's husband. "I thought she looked familiar."

O'Malley, a former Baltimore County prosecutor — and the wife of Mayor Martin O'Malley and daughter of Attorney General J. Joseph Curran Jr. — officially began her new job as a District Court

judge yesterday, presiding over a civil docket at the court on Fayette and Gay streets.

All of the half-dozen people interviewed as they left the courtroom yesterday expressed two things: They thought she did a pretty good job, and they didn't know her name — the nameplate sitting on her desk [See Judge, 6A]

# Few recognize presiding judge

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still read: "Jack I. Lesser. Judge."

Told it was the judge's first day, Nancy Newkirk, in court helping her 15-year-old daughter, Dionne, resolve a dispute with their neighbor, said, "I can tell. There's some things she didn't know that she should have known. But I think she's doing OK."

When she found out the judge was O'Malley, Newkirk said, "Get oukta here!"

Newkirk continued, "I do feel privileged. It's not every day that you get a mayor's spouse" — although former Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke's wife had been her son's eye doctor, she said.

A 30-year-old minister, in court to drop an action against his wife, thought he had seen the judge somewhere before, but couldn't quite place her. "Is it, um, Kathleen Curran Townsend?" he suggested.

Not quite. "Is she a politician?" he tried again. Not exactly. "Is she related to the president? Help me out here."

O'Malley spent her first day listening to couples, neighbors, parents and friends tell why she should force one person to stay away from another. She heard a mother explain that her son should be barred from her workplace because he comes there to get money for his heroin habit. She heard a 17-year-old mother explain that her baby's father was physically abusive and should not be allowed near their home.

She granted temporary protective orders, tried to make sure people dropping their requests hadn't been coerced, and, in at least one case, sounded more like a counselor than an officer of the court.

"You two may find, when this has all expired, that you could be close friends," she said, as the

teen-agers in question shook their heads. They girls had feuded for years, and now one had allegedly spit candy and thrown a bottle at the other.

O'Malley wished the heroin addict good luck, and told a sad-looking woman dropping a protective order request that she could come back if she needed to.

O'Malley was firm, asking people to speak up when she couldn't hear them, stopping them with an abruptly raised index finger when they interrupted her. And despite a few minor mistakes, such as repeatedly calling lawyer Stephen L. Verch, "Mr. Lurch," court clerk Peggy Greene gave her high marks. "You did great, you really did," she told O'Malley during a break.

O'Malley said yesterday she still "felt a little slow" on the bench. One of her challenges, she said, was to get the information she

needed from people during hearings without increasing their agitation, a common state in protective-order disputes.

While cases about name-calling and spitting candy don't exactly thrill her, she said, she is interested in more serious domestic cases. "You get everyone in there, from a woman who's a medical resident to someone who had to take five buses to get here," she said.

Because her familial connections could lead to real or perceived bias on the bench, O'Malley has asked the state's Judicial Ethics Committee to deliver an opinion on whether she should recuse herself from certain cases. Until the committee responds, O'Malley will not deal with cases that name the mayor and City Council, or those that include police witnesses, since the police commissioner is appointed by the mayor.

But even cases that appear to

have no connection to O'Malley can potentially raise questions of conflict. Yesterday, for example, Paul Martell, manager of the Manila Grille and Cafe in Butcher's Hill, came to ask that an allegedly abusive neighbor not be allowed near the business. O'Malley granted his request for six months.

Outside the courtroom, Martell said the neighbor, who works for city Housing Commissioner Paul T. Graziano, had made anti-gay and racist remarks to him and others, boasting, "My boss got away with it, so I can say anything I want." ("He's dead wrong," said Housing Authority spokesman Kevin Brown when told of the comment yesterday.)

In December, witnesses said Graziano made anti-homosexual

comments in a Fells Point bar during a drunken episode. The mayor angered some people — including Martell — when he blamed alcohol for the commissioner's behavior and refused to fire him.

But none of that came out in the courtroom, and Martell didn't know O'Malley was the judge hearing his case. "I think the judge has done a fair thing," he said. "She done perfect."

Lynch, who also praised her performance, approved of the judge's relationship to the mayor. "I think it's good, because they're both on the city side now," she said.

Dionne Newkirk, too, said the judge's personal connections did not trouble her. "A judge is a judge," she said. "As long as they make good decisions."