

Schnelz offers faster justice

"I've got a knack for clearing up backlogs," said District Court Judge Gene Schnelz.

Schnelz, a 45-year-old Walled Lake resident, is banking on that knack and his reputation as a no-nonsense judge to win him one of three new Oakland Circuit Court seats.

With more than 10 years of experience as a municipal judge and chief judge for the geographically sprawling 5th District, Schnelz said he could break a jammed docket and speed the processing of criminal and civil cases in Oakland Circuit Court.

"When I became a district judge, I inherited a huge backlog. Now we're absolutely current in civil cases and we're absolutely current in criminal cases," Schnelz said.

A ROTUND man with an easy smile and a quick wit, Schnelz does not hesitate to lay some of the blame for Oakland's backed-up dockets with the 11 persons sitting on the bench.

"When I and other candidates say we see problems, others on the bench jump down our throats.

"They say, 'Why are you using us for whipping boys?'"

"Well, I don't think we're using them as whipping boys, I, and others, feel that maybe we can contribute a fresh approach and some new ideas," Schnelz said.

The Walled Lake judge said that he'd start court promptly, work to try to institute a family court to handle domestic problems, and do away with "the cattle call," which he says is unpopular with criminal trial lawyers practicing in Oakland County and has

forced some Oakland lawyers to refuse criminal appointments.

The cattle call is used to describe a judge telling a number of attorneys and prosecutors to be prepared to try their cases on a particular day. In reality, so many court cases are called up that there is no chance for all to go to trial.

It's a waste, say Schnelz and other candidates, for lawyers and witnesses to spend a day waiting in vain for the trial to begin.

He also said that sitting judges have not allowed Fred Mester, Oakland County court administrator, and his staff to explore new time-saving, efficient methods of speeding the judicial process.

Schnelz, however, tempered his criticism. "It's kind of like a Cadillac. If you stuff 35 people inside, the shocks are going to drag and you're going to get really poor gas mileage. They're usually so busy they don't have the time to see what's new."

ASIDE FROM the nuts-and-bolts administration of justice, Schnelz still speaks in somewhat idealistic terms. "I believe in instilling values and pride and self-satisfaction," he said.



GENE SCHNELZ
A knack

He says he has tried to do that on the bench, especially with the teenagers who come before him.

Instead of doling out the customary fines and sending them through the usual probation procedures, he said, he assigns them to special 16-week "public service sentences." He also makes it mandatory that they see a priest, rabbi, minister or philosophy professor to discuss the moral implications of what they did.

"They're doing it because I jam it down their throats. But they seem to be learning something."

"If I would fine them, mom and dad would have probably paid it."

"And what would they have learned? That they can buy their way out of trouble."

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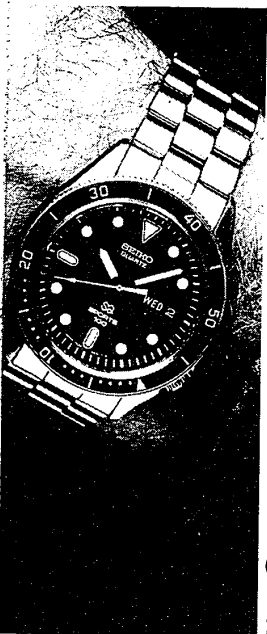
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