

# Court Watchers monitor judicial dignity

By Janice Brunson  
staff writer

**G**ADFLIES, meddlers, concerned citizens. Yvonne Atkinson of Bloomfield Township and a loose coalition of volunteers have been variously called all of the above. But Atkinson and the others prefer their own designation.

They call themselves Court Watchers of Oakland County, a group of men and women who say they help support a strong judicial system by monitoring the county's 14 circuit judges.

"We watch for anything that adds to or detracts from a feeling of justice," said Atkinson, who founded Court Watchers in late 1975 in response to the county's bicentennial celebration the following year.

"We are not lawyers. We don't have the expertise to judge whether the law is being followed. We go on appearance in the courtroom, the sense of justice," said Atkinson.

ATKINSON noted a possible "detraction from justice" last month, during a murder trial before Circuit Judge Fred Mester. During deliberations, Mester briefly permitted news photographers access to the front of the court to photograph the 41-year-old defendant, his defense attorney and the prosecution.

"In this particular instance, with this particular judge, I'll probably go and talk to him about it. You can always talk to Judge Mester," Atkinson said.

VI Pearson, a Bloomfield Hills mother of four adult children and a court watcher twice a week for nearly 10 years, took exception to a sentence handed out by Circuit Judge Francis O'Brien several years ago.

Four-year-old Nicole Bied died after being hit by an auto driven by a young man found guilty of drinking and driving. O'Brien sentenced him to one year in jail. He was eligible for parole in four months.

"The judge lamely said the defendant had no prior convictions and had a family to support. That didn't set well with anyone, other than the man's family," said Pearson.

In response to a sentence she felt unfair, she also became an activist in Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

WHILE COURT watchers may personally disagree with judicial decisions, their role in the courtroom is not one of opinion. It is to observe judicial behavior.

"I just think it keeps everyone on their toes, knowing someone is watching," said Polly Pennell. She has observed twice weekly in circuit court for six years after accompanying a friend who is no longer a volunteer watcher.

Pennell has noted such non-judicial behavior as tardiness and rudeness.

One sitting circuit judge is noted for scheduling court at 8:30 a.m. and arriving at 11:30 a.m. Another is noted for belittling attending attor-

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— Yvonne Atkinson  
Oakland Court Watchers

neys and witnesses. Pennell and the others report their findings to Atkinson.

"THE NEWSLETTER jiggled people up nicely," Atkinson said. Published by her until 1985 and circulated to judges throughout the state and other interested citizens, the newsletter reported on courtroom behavior without using names. The newsletter elicited lively reader response.

Another project was less successful. Until the early 1980s, court watchers completed comprehensive written reports and issued annual report cards, grading each judge. The grades were made public. But of those who were judged, few responded.

"It didn't have the effect we had hoped. Judges believe in their own ability to do the job. They trust their own decisions. They sincerely believe their way is the right way to do things. I guess they have to have faith in their own judgment in order to do the job," Atkinson said.

EXCEPT FOR conferring with judges, Atkinson has few avenues for stimulating change.

Court Watchers, a registered name, has no governing procedures by which to take action. Each incident is based on its own merits. Fortunately, in 13 years of watching, there have been no serious incidents.

"We always have more compliments than complaints," Pennell said.

Of the 14 circuit judges, Atkinson estimated more than half are articulate, dignified, fair and good administrators. Most "are reasonably diligent and honest, a good cut above the average in terms of dispensing justice."

"IT WAS THE first time in my entire life I had ever been in court. It was something I always wanted to do," said Albert Lindow, 66, recently retired from the Michigan Credit Union League in Southfield.

Since retiring, Lindow now has time for the thing he wants to do, including court watching.

Lindow is one of 4,000 volunteers trained by Atkinson who developed training techniques after months of "prodding" the courts and asking questions of the court administrator who in 1975 was Fred Mester.

Lindow has spent hours conversing with Atkinson, attempting to

"soak up" her experience. After a single court visit, Lindow knows watching requires skills honed from experience.

During that solitary visit, Circuit Judge Hilja Gage presided over a personal injury case. Lindow said he found himself so caught up in testimony, he forgot to observe courtroom procedure.

Atkinson is a typical volunteer, middle-aged or older with time on his hands, well educated, of at least moderate income and somewhat conservative in personal views, according to Atkinson.

"These are our courts. We can walk in and observe anytime we want. Unfortunately, most people don't know very much about their court system."

Court watching, she added, is the public's commitment to support of a good judiciary.



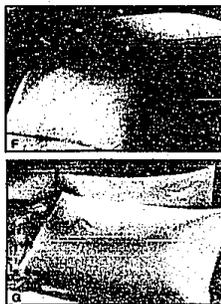
Yvonne Atkinson and Albert Lindow keep tabs on behavior of Oakland's 14 circuit judges.

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HUDSON'S

## Oakland parks veteran retires

Chuck Ross has seen the Oakland County parks system grow from six parks and golf courses to nine since he has worked with the county.

Ross is retiring as chief of administrative services for the 4,000-acre park system.

Ross, a Waterford Township resident, has seen diversification and growth of the parks during his 16 years with the county.

The facilities developed have included two waterparks and waterlides, the Glen Oaks golf course, Independence Oaks County Park and Nature Center, Red Oaks golf course and domed driving range, a new tennis complex and the acquisition of Orion Oaks County Park.

More than facilities, programs and operations, however, Ross credits the people he has worked with as his biggest job asset. Many of those employees in the accounting, personnel and purchasing areas he directs have been with him since he started.

An avid golfer, Ross has honed his skill on the county's four courses, giving him a chance to see what he had accomplished.

"I've enjoyed the diversity of my



Chuck Ross

work and the parks system and have been able to see so many visible results of our accomplishments," Ross said.

## Dinosaur expert to speak

Jack Horner, the paleontologist whose name is synonymous with dinosaurs, will discuss his latest discoveries from the Mesozoic age during three lectures Saturday, April 8, at Cranbrook Institute of Science, 1200 Pine Road, Bloomfield Hills.

Curator of paleontology at the Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman, Mont., Horner is the only scientist to discover an extensive dinosaur nesting ground. His work has led him to conclude that dinosaurs fed and protected their young over a period of several months, while the babies stayed in the nest.

In addition to his book, "Digging Dinosaurs," Horner has published re-

ports of his work in Nature, the prestigious British scientific journal, and Scientific America.

In a special visit to Cranbrook Institute of Science, Horner will conduct a dinosaur workshop for ages 12 through adult beginning at 8:30 a.m.; a one-hour presentation called "Dinosaurs for Everyone," designed for all ages at 8 p.m.; and finally, "An Evening With Jack Horner" for adults at 8 p.m.

Tickets are \$25 for the workshop; \$5 for adults and \$3 for children at the family presentation; and \$10 for the evening lecture (including refreshments). Tickets can be reserved by calling 645-3230.