

# Oakland judge fights battle of her own



By Janice Brunson  
staff writer

Five days a week, the honorable Hilda Gage wages war against crime in Oakland County Circuit Court where she has dispensed justice since being elected to the judiciary in 1978.

The rest of the time Gage, 49, wages war against multiple sclerosis, a disease that for the past 15 years has threatened to ravage her body.

Gage, who developed an interest in the law while majoring in constitutional history at the University of Michigan, is among the first female judges in Michigan. She is also the first woman to preside over the Michigan Judge Association and the National Conference of State Trial Judges.

Another dubious first: Gage is quite possibly the only sitting judge in the country who is physically disabled as a result of multiple sclerosis.

"I'm not sure what drove me to pack it all in, to get it done so quickly. Maybe deep in my heart I knew," she said of the illness and her many accomplishments and community activities since completing law school at Wayne State University in 1971.

GAGE LEARNED she likely had multiple sclerosis in 1974, the same year her youngest child, an only son called Robbie, died from a rare congenital disease, a neurological condition called dysautonomia. (His two older sisters don't have it.)

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— Hilda Gage

Robbie died when he was 6. During his short life, he was hospitalized 33 times.

"Most people link diagnosis with a stressful situation. It's amazing how many," she said.

Gage's first symptoms included a brief bout of blurred vision and minor "tingling" in her arms and legs. The diagnosis was inconclusive because medical testing had not yet been perfected.

Gage was working as an attorney at the time. Two years later she established a private practice and was simultaneously appointed to serve on the state's Civil Rights Commission.

She describes the appointment as a "quasi judicial position" that prompted a "year for setting justice in play, not just representing your client." When the appointment ended in 1978, she ran for and was elected to the Oakland County Circuit Court. She was re-elected in 1986.

IN THE YEARS since, Gage has taught law, authored professional articles, served in numerous professional organizations, received countless awards of achievement and been an active community volunteer.

Her schedule continues to be packed with social, professional and

volunteer activities, in spite of numbness on her left side that causes a pronounced limp, a hand she cannot use and palsy.

"I had so many good years. I considered the diagnosis a mistake," Gage said. For 12 years she was symptom-free. Then, three years ago, the disease attacked with renewed vigor.

Multiple sclerosis is a chronic disease of the central nervous system that is normally diagnosed at 20 to 30 years of age. There is a high incidence of it in Michigan. While it is thought to be a virus that is pre-genetically disposed, there is no known cause or cure.

BASED ON WHAT is known, Gage might again be free of all symptoms. Or she could become totally disabled, unable to control the slightest bodily movement or function.

"The one thing I've learned is, the normal thing is nothing is normal. Some people, you can't tell they have it. Others go directly downhill. I've known two women who were bed ridden. They had to use diapers. Three years later, you can't tell they have it. The nature of the beast is, next year, you know?"

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