

Cool judge: Whether riding the rapids of a white water river, or waves of crime, Oakland County Circuit Judge Hilda Gage stays cool. In the courtroom, she sports a specially designed cooling vest under her robe. The vest helps counteract the effects of multiple sclerosis, which Gage has suffered from for several years. "There is also a hat, but I won't wear that," Gage said, joking.



JIM RIDER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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Multiple sclerosis has turned Hilda Gage into a thrill seeker.

Multiple sclerosis has turned Hilda Gage into a thrill seeker. The 54-year-old Circuit Court judge, who is somewhat unsteady on her feet and walks with a cane, took a white-water-rafting trip down the Arkansas River last summer, in part because the disease has convinced her to value every moment of life.

The trip, Gage said, heightened her senses to the extent that an otherwise routine lunch seemed succulent indeed. "It was the best tuna fish sandwich I had in my whole life," Gage said. "I think the next thing will be bungee jumping."

The Bloomfield Township resident, who takes over as Oakland County Circuit Court chief judge in January, was diagnosed with MS in the early '70s, but didn't show any symptoms for 13 years.

"In the beginning the worst part was the fatigue," Gage said. However, subsequent experimentation with medication under a doctor's care led to the discovery of a combination of drugs that permit the judge to do her job.

Gage's personality has apparently not been affected, as she converses with wit and amity in her chambers at the end of a long day or over lunch at Brandy's on Telegraph Road.

Little bit frightening

The disease, Gage said, "makes everything just a little harder (but) sometimes I have real good days and I forget I have it."

"It's also a little bit frightening to the extent that you don't know how you'll feel when you wake up in the morning and you don't know what the day will bring. When I came out publicly, I had a reporter call me and ask me how long I had to live."

Gage grew up in Detroit of the 1940s and '50s, graduating from Mumford High School with the idea that she'd like to teach school. She achieved this dream with a sixth grade class in the now-defunct Cherry Hill school district of western Wayne County.

What strikes Gage as odd now is that, back then, she accepted employment practices that would be turned into front-page court battles if tried today.

"I never thought twice about

the male teachers making more than the female teachers. Men supported families. Everyone knew that."

While teaching, Gage was also required to take a hiatus when she began to "show" with the pregnancy of her first child. School policy.

The law beckons

As Gage taught school, her husband attended law school. Gage helped with homework and began thinking she might enjoy a career in the law, too.

Five years later she passed the bar and joined a practice. In 1978 she was elected to Oakland County Circuit Court and has been there since.

As Oakland County's first female chief judge, a position she calls "just a product of age," Gage hopes to add a judge or two to the circuit court roster, accelerate child-abuse cases, begin programs of some sort regarding domestic violence and perhaps spread the word on her judicial philosophy.

"We don't create the laws," she said. "We just interpret them. I'm not going to strike down a law because the people don't like it."

That stance should put Gage in good stead with Prosecutor Richard Thompson, who, given the opportunity, will complain at length about rogue judges trying to make law.

But by the same token, Gage and Thompson are on opposite sides of the drug prohibition issue.

Thompson steadfastly supports prohibition. Gage agrees with U.S. Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders who recently said legalization of recreational drugs would drastically reduce crime and ought to be studied.

"There may be some drugs that should be legalized," Gage said. "We certainly aren't getting any where on our efforts to get rid of drugs. We didn't win in prohibition (of alcohol) and we certainly aren't winning the drug war."

'Hell of a job'

Despite the controversial position, Gage is well thought of in Oakland County government circles. Former corporation counsel Jack Hays said Gage "has just done one hell of a job. I sure think we're getting our money's worth with Hilda."

Gage's appointment as chief

judge, Hays said, is "one of the best things that has happened in Oakland County."

County Clerk Lynn Allen, who provides administrative support to the Circuit Court, said Gage "is strictly top-notch. She does her homework. A very energetic judge."

Allen lauded Gage for programs she has already devised to speed along the judicial process in the overburdened circuit court. For example, it was Gage's idea to schedule early conferences in circuit cases where each side's attorney has the opportunity to tell the judge exactly what he needs to be ready for trial and how many weeks will be required.

"From the moment they file, within two weeks, they know exactly where they are in the process," Gage said. Attorneys are then less likely to request adjournments because they aren't prepared.

Lobbying in Lansing

As chief judge, Gage will hear 40 percent fewer cases than she did in 1993 so that she might keep abreast with the administrative duties the new job entails.

Gage expects she'll spend a fair amount of time lobbying in Lansing and elsewhere to get another judge or two authorized for her court. "We should have a lot more judges, and we can't get any authorization," she said.

As a jurist, Gage doesn't have a tough nickname like "Hong 'em high Hilda," but she's not averse to dishing out long sentences.

She remembers a man convicted in her courtroom of raping a 79-year-old Polish woman who didn't speak English. Gage gave the man an extremely long prison sentence because "I was trying to get him to a level where his testosterone would dry up."

Recently Gage sentenced an elderly man for criminal sexual conduct regarding his own grand daughter. The parade of deviant behavior goes on, but Gage seems to maintain her cheerful mien like a woman determined not to let the ants spoil her picnic.

Perhaps it's because the people she sends to jail generally get religion before it's over. "I find that God is alive and well at the Oakland County Jail because everybody who goes over there finds him," Gage said.



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