

Judge reflects on law, life

BY JENNIFER PLACINTO
STAFF WRITER

While Dr. Jack Kevorkian is offering an out for some people afflicted with multiple sclerosis, recently appointed Michigan Court of Appeals Judge Hilda Gage is an inspiring example of what life can be like living with MS.

"I have to be very careful in commenting on Dr. Kevorkian because of the real possibility this matter (assisted suicide) could come before us," Gage said. "I was concerned about the publicity involved. He made statements that MS was terminal. It's not terminal — we're all terminal."

Gage said MS can be depressing because one week symptoms could strike, and the next week they could wane. But having MS hasn't stopped her from serving as an Oakland County Circuit judge for 18 years. The 57-year-old Bloomfield Township resident is looking forward to spending even more time on individual case law as an appellate judge in her Southfield office.

"It's a different kind of judgeship," she said. "There's a lot

more time to read the law, review the cases and reflect."

Gage was appointed to the Court of Appeals judgeship vacated by Marilyn Kelly in December 1996. Kelly, a Bloomfield Hills resident, was elected to the Supreme Court, a seat Gage also was pursuing.

"It was a good race," Gage said. "I have absolutely no regrets in running."

But now Gage plans to stick with the appellate court and will seek election to another term in two years. She hopes to run unopposed as she has done in her years on the circuit bench since being appointed to that position in 1974, the same year she was diagnosed with MS.

Gage went to see a physician when her vision became cloudy in one eye. The neuritis, an inflammation of nerves in the eye, tipped doctors off to the presence of MS. However, Gage said she did not exhibit any symptoms of the illness for 13 years and thought she had been misdiagnosed.

"(Neuritis) went away, thank God, never to return," Gage said, adding that overheating has a lot to do with the symptoms of

MS. "I used to wear a cooling jacket . . . and it made a big difference in my energy level."

Gage has difficulty walking long distances so she compensates for the energy loss with a cane and her "motor scooter."

"Thank God it hasn't affected my ability to speak and write and read," she said.

Because Gage was open about her illness, she received several calls from people afraid to tell others they were suffering from MS. "The danger of hiding it is people think you're drunk if you stagger or slur your words," she said. "There's nothing to be ashamed of and it's not contagious."

Gage went to law school after having two children, working as a school teacher and helping to fund her now ex-husband's law school education. When she graduated with honors, she stayed on the faculty and clerked in Wayne County Circuit Court. A judge assigned her some cases and she decided to work as an attorney full-time.

"It's like I've gone full circle from being a teacher," Gage said. Gage will miss her tenure at



Newly appointed: Judge Hilda Gage takes the law and life with MS in stride.

the circuit level. "I had the live action," she said, adding that in the appellate court, "You're fairly isolated and the only action I get is what I read."

Some cases will always stick in Gage's mind, such as a 17-year-old quadriplegic who decided at age 34 that he didn't want to live anymore. "He wanted to be off the respirator," Gage said. "I

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