

Improving justice

Court Watchers score the judges

By Suzie Rollins Singer
staff writer

A couple dozen volunteers in Oakland County spend their days keeping an eye on justice.

Their activity is court watching. Their subjects: Oakland's 14 Circuit Court judges.

"We want to help people become acquainted with the communities and their court system. We want to have a positive effect on the judges," said Yvonne Atkinson, leader of the county court watchers and editor of its newsletter, Watch Words.

ATKINSON HAS headed the group since 1976 when it began as a Bicentennial project, sponsored by the North Suburbs Inter-Faith Center for Racial Justice.

Its initial goal was to assure that minorities received equal treatment under law. The Inter-Faith Center was established by church groups following the 1967 Detroit race riots.

At its inception, the project received funds from various churches. That only lasted one year, said Sally Chaignon, acting chairperson for the Northeast Inter-Faith Center for Racial Justice.

After the first year, Atkinson redefined the Oakland County group's goal as "providing equal treatment under the law to all who are accused."

"That (original goal) was too narrow. We're not functioning as an inter-faith project. We were authorized by the Oakland County Bicentennial Commission to carry out the broader-based goal," Atkinson explained.

"WE DON'T receive funds from anyone, and we don't have any sponsors. We're totally independent," she said.

"This project is designed to bridge the gap between people and the justice system. We want people to come to the court house and feel comfortable. As long as the public is in the court room watching, there won't be flagrant improprieties," she said.

"Sometimes we have to pop our heads in when a judge locks a door while talking to a jury and tell him — or her — that they aren't allowed to do that," Atkinson said.

Persons interested in becoming court watchers may call Yvonne Atkinson at 646-3623.

Court watchers' average age is 55, she said, and they are primarily women or retirees who have time to do volunteer work.

COURT WATCHERS may pick their cases. Usually, jury trials lure them to a particular judge.

Court watchers are given form sheets outlining specific duties a judge should perform. They include, among other things, "Did the judge speak loudly enough for the whole courtroom to hear? Was he specific in his directions to the jury? Was he polite?" Atkinson explained.

At the end of each year, their responses are combined and a written report is given to each judge.

They are also kept on file for public scrutiny in the group's office on the third floor of the court house outside of Judge Steven Andrews' chambers.

"Most of the judges say nothing. A

few of them will want to talk to us at a later date, but most just accept the reports," she said.

"We hope they read them and, if there are suggestions, that they improve. But I must say we have more praise than criticism," she added.

Judge Richard Kuhn praised the group for doing such a good job. "The group could be quite helpful if it points out things to the public. They discuss whether a judge's attitude is too severe, and they do comment on whether the judge shows prejudice to anyone of any race," he said.

COURT WATCHERS has never had

a case to report to the judicial tenure commission, but wouldn't hesitate if needed.

"We did have a woman file a grievance against an attorney once," Atkinson said.

By the end of the year, most judges are assessed equally, although some judges may have been subject to more ratings because they heard more "interesting or exciting" cases which attracted court watchers.

"We urge people to see as many judges as they can because they can compare better if they do," Atkinson explained.

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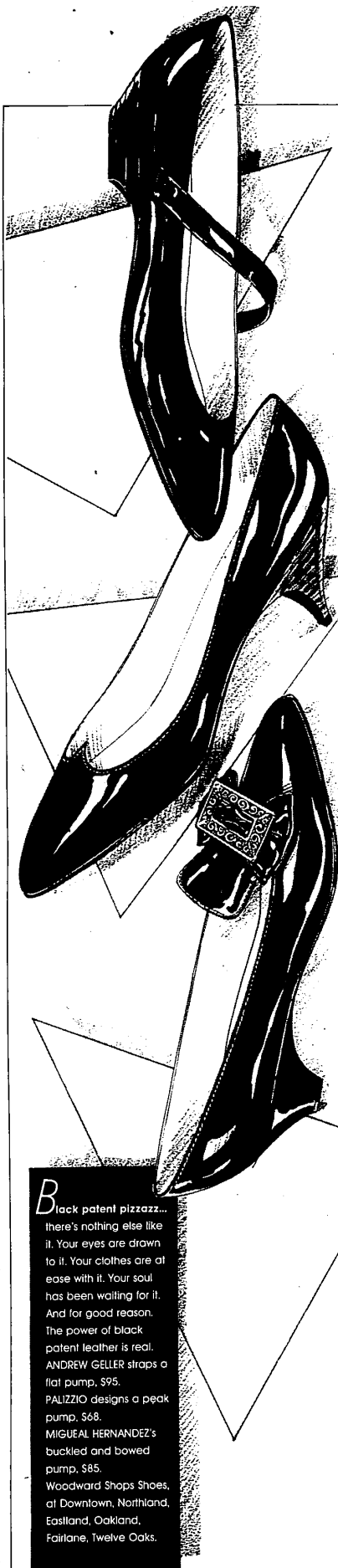
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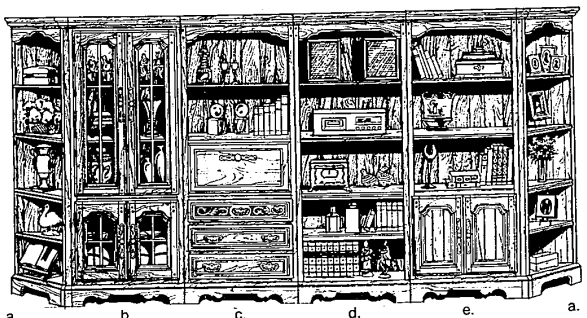
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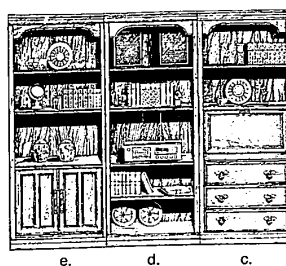
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