

LaPlata confirmed, plays down ethnic role

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

His Mexican heritage certainly hasn't hurt George LaPlata's chances for promotion.

But the man who will become Michigan's first Hispanic-American federal court judge doesn't trade on his roots.

"I don't believe in hyphenated Americans. That's baloney," said the Oakland County circuit judge. "You're either an American or something else. If you're born and raised here, you're not a minority, you're a majority."

LaPlata will be sworn in May 10 as judge of the U.S. District Court of Eastern Michigan. His appointment by President Reagan received U.S. Senate confirmation last week.

ACTUALLY, THE West Bloomfield resident gained his legal reputation representing the rights of minorities — Mexican nationals working as migrants in Michigan, Ohio and Indiana.

A Detroit native whose father was Mexican and mother Austrian, LaPlata grew up in a mixed neighborhood on the city's southwest side.

After graduation from Detroit College of Law in 1956, the Spanish-speaking attorney practiced solo in Detroit's "barrio." Six months later, he teamed up with the midwest's only other Hispanic lawyer.

WHILE MOST LAWYERS rarely venture out of one county, LaPlata and former partner George Menendez traveled the region as midwest legal counsel for the Republic of Mexico.

Their migrant clients came to Michigan under the federal Bracero program, which allowed Mexicans to emigrate to the U.S. temporarily during harvest season. The program was discontinued in the mid-1960s.

"Have briefcase, will travel," recalls LaPlata, who logged 40,000 miles a year handling a wide range of criminal and civil cases. The work ranged from employer negligence to murder and kidnapping where the death penalty was involved.



Judge George LaPlata
not hyphenated

BECAUSE HE represented Mexican nationals, many of his cases were fought in the federal court, where he will preside May 13 from Judge Anna Diggs-Taylor's former bench. The grandson of a Mexican general describes his former clients as "just marvelous people to work with."

"They just don't give you a bad time. And if convicted, they accept it stoically," explained LaPlata. "And they always pay their bills — even if only \$10 a week."

LaPlata also speaks as highly of the judiciary who gave his clients as much consideration as any others.

"It just shows how fair people are," said the judge. "I think people cause their own problems."

FAIRNESS is a hallmark with LaPlata, who is known for carefully weighing both sides of an issue before making a decision. The jurist recounts changing his mind at the last minute on his most important deci-

sion — declaring reapportionment of legislative districts unconstitutional in spring 1984.

"The final argument turned me around. I actually switched right in the middle of the stream," said LaPlata, who took only four hours to formulate an opinion on the issue.

"I don't take things under advisement. Right or wrong I get it out right away," said the judge, whose rule is to make a decision in less than two weeks.

"If you wait, it becomes more vague in your mind."

ENCOURAGED BY the Latin American Bar Association to submit his name for Oakland County Circuit Court, LaPlata became the state's first Hispanic-American judge in 1979.

Gov. William Milliken named him to the post as successor to the late Bernard L. Kaufman, a West Bloomfield resident who died of a heart attack. At the time, he was a partner with LaPlata, Finnen and Koschinski in Detroit.

The new post changed life "drastically" for LaPlata, who almost quit within two weeks. "I'd never been stuck in a building before," recalled the silver-haired father of three.

"But it gave me an opportunity to do things I thought should be done. I knew how a good court is run because I've been in so many."

ON THE BENCH faithfully by 8:30 a.m. whether or not anyone is in his courtroom, he has made it a rule to be accessible to both litigants and the public.

LaPlata is known throughout the courthouse for his courtesy. "I'm a nut on good manners," said LaPlata. "I don't care what you do for a living, you must have good manners."

Assistant Prosecuting Attorney Joyce Todd, who spent two years working with the judge, describes him as "gracious" both on and off the bench.

"He's a man of incredible patience," said Todd. "Even after a ruling, he's always people to speak. He's very polite in dealing with people."

WHILE ALWAYS polite to them, the judge takes a hard line in sentencing lawbreakers. A former Marine, LaPlata believes firmly in jail as a deterrent.

"I don't believe in rehabilitation. It just doesn't work," he explained. "I think there is a class of people in this country who are criminals; it's an occupation."

As a result, LaPlata makes it a point nev-

er to fit the sentences to the criminals. "I never have, and I never will," said the judge, who believes "Sociology 101" has no place in the courtroom.

"What difference does it make if someone with a terrible life kills your child?"

"They're criminals — not oppressed. And they're watching to see how we respond to their misconduct."

'Have briefcase, will travel,' was lawyer LaPlata's motto early in his career.'

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Gas price to drop this month — CPC

Natural gas customers of Consumers Power Co. can expect lower heating bills this month.

The typical residential space-heating customer can expect to save approximately \$4.35 or, his or her April gas bill, based on usage of 16 MCF per month.

The utility notified the Michigan Public Service Commission (MPSC) that the gas cost recovery factor (GCR) for the month by 27 cents, to \$4 per thousand cubic feet (MCF).

CONSUMERS Power serves more than 1.1 million natural gas customers, including most Oakland and Wayne county suburbs except Redford.

"Our two major natural gas suppliers have given us good news in recent weeks about gas costs," said Charles F. Brown, vice president of

customer services.

"Seventy-five percent of our gas supply is being cut in cost or having its price frozen. These savings are being passed directly to our customers."

Trunkline Gas Co., which accounts for 50 percent of Consumers Power's supply, is reducing the cost of gas by \$50 million.

Panhandle Eastern Pipe Line Co., which accounts for approximately 25 percent of the supply, has frozen its wholesale rates for the next six months.

BROWN SAID increasing deregulation of the natural gas industry has permitted utilities more flexibility in contracting for fuel in recent years.

In particular, the spot market for gas has become more attractive, with falling prices and increasing supplies.

GOP salutes area judges

The Republican committee of Oakland County will hold its second annual "Salute to Justice" fund-raising event for probate, district, circuit, appeals and state Supreme Court judges and justices at 7 p.m. Tuesday, April 16, in the Main Event Ballroom of the Pontiac Silverdome.

The "Salute" is designed to spotlight the excellent relationship between the Republican Committee and the local

legal community, according to chairman Attorney Frank Mamet, a West Bloomfield attorney.

In addition to the judges, other speakers on the agenda include Joseph Knollenberg, Oakland County GOP chairman, and Lynn D. Allen, county clerk.

Tickets at \$25 a person and \$45 a couple may be obtained by calling finance director Larry Dickerson at 330-1133.

OU 'Couples' seminar set

"Communication for Couples" will be presented by Oakland University's Continuum Center from 7:30-10:30 p.m. Friday, April 19, in St. John Fisher

Chapel, Rochester Hills. Fee is \$25 per couple. To register, call the Continuum Center at 370-3053.

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