

# Sitting Justice of the Peace injects history into election

By Les Pierres Streater  
Sentinel-Voice

On Election Day, Clark County voters will have the opportunity to elect Nevada's first African-American female to a judicial bench presently occupied by the only African-American female ever appointed to that bench.

Judge Karen Bennett is seeking to become that individual. If elected she will have the honor of being Nevada's first African-American female elected at any level to the state's judiciary system. She was appointed to the justice court post in May 2002 by the Clark County Board of Commissioners, succeeding Justice Jennifer Togliatti who was appointed to the district court bench.

Bennett is a graduate of the Thurgood Marshall School of Law and has worked as an Assistant Federal Public Defender, General Counsel to the Las Vegas Housing Authority, Associate Bond Counsel for the Clark County School District, and done private practice in the areas of municipal finance, housing and civil & criminal law.

In the September 2004 Primary Election, Bennett ran against challengers Jim Gubler and Chris Rasmussen. She garnered 37,189 (41.5 percent) of the votes cast in the race compared to 35,346 (39.5 percent) for Gubler and 17,007 (18.9 percent) for Rasmussen.

When asked why she is seeking office, Bennett said, "I am running because I feel that its time for me to give back to the community. I grew up here in Las Vegas, and this community has been overwhelmingly supportive of all of my efforts from childhood through adulthood. This has been a major professional adjustment for me, even though we as a people of color make up a majority of the people coming through the court system, we are very few and far between in terms of being the decision makers affecting the lives of others and, for that reason, it is important that I do run and that's why I am running."

Drawing a distinction between herself and her opponent, Gubler, in the General Election on November 2, Bennett said, "My opponent, if elected, will continue the



Sentinel-Voice photo by Les Pierres Streater

*Las Vegas Justice of the Peace Karen Bennett-Haron, pictured with husband Fred, is the first African-American woman in Nevada history to serve in the judicial post.*

same status quo that has been a part of that system for as long as it has been in existence. With my background in civil and criminal law, which is different from my opponent who has primarily worked in the Public Defender's Office, it gives me a wealth of experience to deal with individuals who sometimes come to court and represent themselves. That allows me the opportunity to expand the scope given to judges and promote alternatives in sentencing that are fair and just for poor people who are vulnerable to the system and not subject them to the same conditions that have been ongoing."

A report dated March 4, 2003, by the National Legal Aid & Defender Association entitled, "Evaluation of the Public Defender Office-Clark County, Nevada," noted, "The CCPDO (Clark County Public Defender Office) has a long-standing institutional culture that places a priority on attorney autonomy over the collective health of the organization.

This has fostered organizational isolationism that limits accountability, support and professional development of staff, and inhibits interactions between attorneys in the office, between attorneys and support staff, between the organization and its client base, and between the organization and the national indigent defense community — all of

which has hindered the organization's ability to change as circumstances dictate."

The report also highlights that the CCPDO management was indifferent to representing clients responsibly, relying on public defenders to seek pleas rather than trying cases proving innocence. Added to that, the report was critical of the lack of supervision by CCPDO management and failure to adhere to ethical standards.

According to Gubler's resume, he was a member of the Clark County Public Defender's office from August 1975 to June 2001. He was a team chief responsible for five to eight trial attorneys, an investigator, and a legal secretary. Gubler has criticized Bennett claiming that she isn't qualified to hold office, but has failed to take into account the environment he was employed in for 16 years and failure to adhere to national standards for quality representation by indigent defense providers.

Evaluating the process of judicial decorum in the courtroom, Bennett said, "One of the things that I have insisted on is to be fair, consistent, unbiased, and not a rubber stamp for law enforcement, the district attorney's office, or the Public Defender's Office. My belief system, as a practitioner, as a lawyer, is that the public sector is that

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# KEEP

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