

Service a priority for Register of Wills

By Gena R. Chattin
Special to The Sentinel

On May 5, the inaugural Saturday of the Prince George's County Register of Wills' "First Saturday" program, a woman was at the door at 8 a.m. waiting to get in. Register of Wills Cereta A. Lee was in the lobby helping her staff set out refreshments and balloons to greet her.

As register, Lee's duties vary broadly, but all have to do with difficult arrangements after a county resident's death.

Personal experience drove Lee to run for the office. An aunt whose children had predeceased her died with no updated will. Lee said she knew that her aunt wanted her to inherit everything, but because her aunt died without updating her will, Lee lost out to a grandson the law considered next-of-kin.

This experience shaped Lee's campaign platform: To educate people how important it is to have and regularly update a will.

It's not enough just to have a will, Lee said, but loved ones need to know that it exists.

"You don't have to tell them what's in it, but you do have to tell someone where it is," she said.

Lee's work in county govern-

ment has come as a step-by-step process. She started as an administrative assistant to Sheriff Michael Jackson when she retired after 31 years working for Verizon.

Before that, Lee tells young people that she literally climbed the ladder of success: She started off as a clerk at Verizon before moving up to positions as a technician (where she climbed real ladders), a supervisor and a project manager.

Her work as Register of Wills began when Lee unseated incumbent Register of Wills Lynn Skerpon in 2006. Since taking office, the new register has made several changes, from setting out a comment box to instituting the "First Saturdays" program in which the office opens from 8 a.m. to noon on the first Saturday of every month.

Lee's public service efforts go beyond her government role. She said she's volunteered with Habitat for Humanity and Christmas in April, participated in walkathons for breast cancer and domestic violence survivors and took part in a shoe bank project, student mentoring, the Moms Mentoring Moms program and more.

Why so many organizations?

"People seem to know that I care about people, so I get asked quite a bit," Lee said.



COURTESY PHOTO

Cereta A. Lee, Register of Wills for Prince George's County, has made customer service a priority for the office since being sworn in back in December. Since then, changes have been as noticeable as establishing office hours the first Saturday of every month and as minor as mandatory name tags for office employees.

"She really has a heart for the community," said Assistant Chief Deputy Register of Wills Kellie Armstead.

Armstead said she worked in the register of wills office for about two years. Since Lee came on board, Armstead said Lee had worked to make

the office "more about the customer."

Some of the changes were as small as mandatory employee name tags or making coffee for guests, but Armstead believed they contributed to a service-oriented environment.

Armstead said Lee was also concerned with making a pleasant workplace for her staff and that Lee's open-door policies encouraged ideas for improvement from every member of her team.

One of the most popular changes made from the staff's point of view was implementing flex time. Lee said staff members who work Saturdays, for example, could take that time off during the regular workweek.

Lee's chief deputy, Kelly Del Rio, said that the new policies had the dual benefit of opening the office to Prince George's County residents who couldn't get there during the week and of freeing the employees to tend to their own, similar weekday errands.

Lee also demands results in return for these benefits. Armstead said Lee was "very adamant" about making sure files are up to date and eliminating any backlogs. In about three weeks after Lee took office, Armstead said the staff had finished all leftover filing, shipping and verification and that they were still caught up.