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AROUND THE ISLAND CRIME & COURTS LAW AND ORDER

A Song and Dance For Judicial Reform

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Four dour court experiences on Long Island and other parts of New York are making Gloria Parker - a world-renowned musician who has been enchanting audiences for decades - sing bitter tunes these days.

The Syosset resident who played her "glass harmonica" in Woody Allen's "Broadway Danny Rose" is incensed with the judicial system she calls "corrupt."

Parker is one of several New Yorkers who use unusual, if abrasive, methods to confront judges and attorneys they think are running roughshod over the Constitution, denying justice and robbing the legally unsavvy.

In her most recent court battle over a deceased friend's will, Parker said she felt all but ignored by the judge, and cheated by attorneys.

"Evil lurks in these buildings where men wear robes of black and defy God," she said. "These buildings are called courthouses or, more appropriately, brothels," Parker said, voicing her frustration and distaste for the judicial system.

Her complaints are in the titles of her 22 tracks on a CD titled "Corruption Reigns in the Courtroom." The music ranges from waltzes to samba: "Money Buys Justice," "If You Know the Judge, No Need for the Law," and "What Has Happened to Justice?"

The songs were written by Parker, who accompanies The Witnesses, a band she assembled.

"I don't say all judges or lawyers are dishonest but my experiences in New York have alerted me to the corrupt dealings in the court," she said.

Parker is not alone in her sentiments.

Americans for Legal Reform, in Huntington Station, is among the court's most visible detractors. The group's truck, with its 12-foot-high billboard that reads "Stop the Lawyer Disease" is occasionally spotted in the parking lots of Long Island courts.

Some critics call them loudmouths. Members use a bullhorn to spread their accusations against barristers and judges alike with an arsenal of lawyer jokes. One favorite: "What do you say to a lawyer

with an IQ of 50? Good morning, Your Honor."

"The idea is to get under their skin," said Harvey Kash, a member of the 12-year-old group. "At our meetings we have wall-to-wall people now. There are so many people who have been wounded by the system."

Americans for Legal Reform has volunteer court watchers, maintains a database that members use to refer people to or steer them away from attorneys, coaches people on filing grievances against attorneys or judges and helps people develop a strategy for dealing with the court and their attorneys.

Andrew Schepard, a Hofstra law professor, said many criticisms of the judicial system stem from the structural problems of an outdated system where politics can undermine efficiency.

"I understand them being angry," he said, adding the fact that the court system is unnecessarily complex, uses Latin phrases and is expensive and time-consuming bars it from being user friendly.

"Many of these are structural issues," he said. "The way people frame them is they are angry with the individual judges and lawyers. They should look for systemic reform."

But Schepard praised the state's Chief Justice Judith Kaye for advocating changes to cut red tape.

Another group watches the judges who watch the judges.

"We document the dysfunction, corruption and politicization in the processes," said Elena Sassower, coordinator of the Center for Judicial Accountability in White Plains. "The public has a very limited role and the essential things take place behind closed doors and what that conceals is how dysfunctional and corrupt they are."

Sassower's group, which includes Long Islanders, has targeted the state Commission on Judicial Conduct, the sole body empowered to discipline jurists. One problem is that the 11-member body of appointees seems accountable to no one, least of all state taxpayers, said a former state comptroller.

"The commission's activities remain shielded from independent review and the citizens of the State are denied independent assurance that a critical state program is operated in compliance with all applicable laws and procedures," reads a 1989 report by then- State Comptroller Edward V. Regan. The report was titled "Not Accountable to the Public: Resolving Charges Against Judges Cloaked in Secrecy."

Further, Sassower said, few judges are ever disciplined. In fact, in 1999, 83 percent of the 1,424 new complaints against judges and justices were dismissed upon initial review, according to its own documents. In 2000, there were 1,288 complaints and a similar percentage were dismissed on initial review, the documents state. Still, of the 398 investigations conducted in 2000, the commission issued 13 formal "disciplinary determinations," actions such as censures or admonitions, five fewer than in 1999.

Sassower's group "shadows" the progress of complaints, she said. "We examine whether the commission is doing the job the public is paying it to do and is required to do."

Parker's case was resolved last week, but she said she is on a mission from God to warn others.

"The way the justice system is manipulated has truly shocked me," she said.

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