



A YOUNG DEFENDANT hears his sentence after pleading guilty to an assault charge.



JUDGE OLA LEWIS of Boiling Spring Lakes, the state's youngest district court judge, presides over cases in Bladen County last week.

## State's Youngest Judge Tries To Make A Difference

BY ERIC CARLSON

"Haven't I seen your face before?" the judge asks.  
"Uh huh," comes the reply.  
"Sir! Don't Uh-huh me!"  
"Yes ma'am," the defendant answers sheepishly.  
With chin on chest, the young man explains why he was stopped for speeding twice in one week: because his accelerator sticks and his speedometer doesn't work. At least that's what he told the officers.  
"Did he give you any trouble?" the judge asks Trooper Hatcher.  
"No ma'am," he says.  
The second patrolman relates a different experience.  
"I stopped him on the same road and he told me the same story," says Trooper White. "He wasn't quite so nice to me. He made some rather unpleasant comments."  
The defendant explains that he was distraught over getting a second ticket and admits that he may have been impolite.  
"Did you apologize to Trooper White?" the judge asks.  
"No ma'am...Do you want me to?" He takes one look at her expression and turns to Trooper White. He tells him how sorry he is for behaving rudely.  
A wave of muffled giggling runs through the audience.

"Bailiff! Get my courtroom quiet!" snaps the judge. Silence returns before the deputy can get the words out.  
It's hard to believe these verbal whip-cracks are coming from the pretty young woman with the flashing eyes and big smile sitting in her black robe at the business end of district court.

The atmosphere is a fascinating mix of relaxed jocularity and strict order. She jokes and laughs with attorneys and law officers, and sometimes even with defendants, who are shown the same respect that she expects from them. But anyone who steps out of line does so at their peril.

Such is the judicial style of Ola Lewis, the Boiling Spring Lakes woman who, at age 28, is the youngest district court judge in North Carolina. A former prosecutor under District Attorney Rex Gore, Lewis was appointed to the bench last spring as the district bar association's top candidate to replace Judge Jack Hooks.

In just six months, Lewis has garnered praise from prosecutors, law enforcement officers and defense attorneys alike. Ask anybody who works with Lewis—on either side of the bar—and you're likely to hear, "She's tough...but fair."  
"She's a wonderful judge," says Trooper Clark White. "She was a wonderful prosecutor. She's thoughtful of both the public and law enforcement. Everyone respects her very much."

The next defendant is a 17-year-old we'll call Thomas, who pleads guilty to assault, inflicting serious injury. Slouching before Judge Lewis, he looks at her with the cocky defiance of one who has been through this before and left unimpressed.

The victim describes the assault. He tells Lewis about the stitches that were necessary to close his



LISTENING to a relative describe a 17-year-old defendant, Judge Lewis considers how best to sentence the young man.

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—Judge Ola Lewis

wounds and his \$650 in medical bills. The prosecutor outlines Thomas's previous arrest record. The judge asks him if he has anything to say for himself.

"Yeah," Thomas mumbles. "When this is over, you tell him to stop getting in my face."

"Is that your only concern, sir?" Lewis asks, glaring down at him.

"Oh yeah," he says, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. "I'm sorry for hitting him."

"Two years in the Department of Correction!" snaps Lewis. Turning to the bailiff she adds, "Mr. Flynt, take him away right now. I want him out of my sight!"

Thomas's jaw falls and his eyes grow wide when the handcuffs close around his wrists. There are no more titters from the audience as Lewis proceeds with a typical morning of adjudicating misdemeanants.

A woman charged with failing to secure her child in a car seat pleads guilty, but with an explanation: he vomited

in the seat and she didn't have time to clean it up.

Lewis asks a man charged with speeding and reckless driving what kind of car he drives. "A Mustang," he says. She levies a hefty fine and suggests he "might want to think about buying a Hyundai."

Another man pleads guilty to assault on a female. Lewis tells him she will suspend his jail sentence if he agrees to stay away from the woman.

"But we live together," the man says.  
"Uuuuuugh," Lewis moans in frustration. "O.K., then. You are not to threaten or harass this woman. If it is alleged that you have done so, I will set your bond so high that you will not see the break of day."

"That is not a threat. It's a promise," Lewis said. "So if she gets on your nerves, you just walk out the door!"

During a recess, Lewis asks to see Thomas's cousin in her chambers. She asks, "What are we going to do with him?"

The cousin explains that Thomas is not a bad kid. He just has a bad temper. He is still in high school and will be going to one of the new "boot camps" next summer as part of another judge's order on another conviction.

"I know jail is not the answer for this young man. But we've got to do something now to get his attention," Lewis says. "He's at least going to sit down there while I eat my lunch."

"I just don't want to see him end up dead," she says as the cousin leaves.

Lewis says the rising tide of youth violence is the biggest challenge facing the legal system. As more and more young people come before her with the same stories and the same bad attitudes, Lewis says it's tough to remember that each one is unique.

"It's one of the most frustrating things about this job. I just don't want to give up on kids," Lewis says. "I get accused of preaching to them. But if I can look past the negative and reach for something good...If I can make a difference in just one of their lives, I can say it was a job well done."

Lewis doesn't accept easy excuses for criminal behavior. She doesn't want to hear about a defendant "going bad" simply because his family is less fortunate than others or because he doesn't have a perfect home life.

"You have to start with the premise that everybody knows right from wrong and that people make conscious choices to go the right way or the wrong way," she said. "At some point you need to stand up and say, 'I'm responsible.'"

She sometimes tells young offenders about her mother, who grew up poor in a single-parent household. About how she lived on a farm and picked cotton. How she overcame her disadvantages, married a soldier and raised a family of her own, with an ambitious and successful daughter named Ola.

Lewis grew up in Cumberland County, where her father Mose Lewis was stationed at Fort Bragg. After retirement, he took a job with the Brunswick County school system and eventually became assistant superintendent.

After graduating from high school and Fayetteville State University, Lewis embarked on a career in bank-

ing. It wasn't long before she realized that women are slow to advance in the male-dominated world of finance. So she decided to go back to school.

After earning her law degree at N.C. Central University, Lewis joined the Raleigh law office of Dan Blue, speaker of the N.C. House of Representatives. After working as a law clerk and "following politicians around" for a year, Lewis felt she needed courtroom experience. She also wanted to be closer to her father. So she took a job as one of Rex Gore's assistant district attorneys.

"That was absolutely the best thing I could have done," Lewis remembers. "Rex was a good person to work for. I learned a lot from him and I got a lot of experience in a short time."

Lewis found the change from prosecutor to judge to be "a very easy transition." She works in the same courtrooms—in Brunswick, Bladen and Columbus counties—and sees the same sort of cases. With too many defendants like Thomas.

"Oh my goodness. I almost forgot. He's still down there," says Lewis as the court session draws to a close. "What do you do in a case like this?"

It is a more docile and subdued Thomas who returns from the jail to face Judge Lewis. He describes his home as "a hole." He explains how his brother always gets on his nerves. How he can't back down when challenged. How he can't seem to "leave it alone" when a conflict arises.

"I ain't a bad boy. I know I can do better," he says.

"I know you're not a bad boy. That's exactly why I'm not giving up on you," Lewis says as she reads over his school records. "It says here that you're on the basketball team. That you're doing good in school. You've got all but two passing grades."

Lewis agrees to suspend Thomas's prison sentence and to put him on seven months' house arrest. She orders him not to miss a single day in school, to behave as a gentleman, to get no grade lower than a C, to abide by an 8 p.m. curfew (except for work, school or church functions), to get a job and pay back his victim.

She also orders Thomas to write a 10-page essay titled "Youth Violence In America." In it, she tells him to describe his ambitions in life and how he plans to achieve those goals.

Thomas winces at the thought of spending every night for seven months locked up at home. He meekly asks the judge if she might consider reducing that part of the sentence.

"I'm already giving you a break!" Lewis says. "You've had your free bite of the apple. Now you've got to show ME something."

"You show me that you can stay out of trouble. You show me some good grades. You show me that you've got a job and that you're going to pay back this man's hospital bills. If you do that, you can come back in three months and we'll see about taking you off house arrest. Is that a deal?"

"Yes ma'am," he says.

"I'm doing this because I want you to survive, my young brother."

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