4 running for Madison County judge

By Jolene Cleaver, The Oneida Daily Dispatch

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Four candidates are running in the Sept. 10 primary this year for county court judge, a seat vacated in April by the retirement of judge Biagio DiStefano.

There will be primaries for all candidates:

- Kathleen Rapasadi is running on the Republican and Conservative lines;
- Suzanne Knight-Debottis turned in a petition to run on the Democrat line;
- Marian Cerio is running on the Democrat, Working Families and Green lines;
- Patrick O’Sullivan will run in both the Republican and Conservative Party primaries. He is also running on the Independence line.

The Madison County Democratic Committee voted not to endorse a candidate in the primary; a clear majority of members present said that with three strong candidates, all county Democrats can share in the choice by voting in the primary election on Thursday, Sept. 10; meanwhile, county Republicans endorsed O’Sullivan.

This is the first time a woman has run for the position in Madison County, let alone three. In the past 50 years, there have been five county court judges. Currently, Judge Dennis McDermott holds the seat opposite the vacant one. The county court judge seat carries a 10-year term, with a mandatory retirement age of 70.

The $152,000 per year position starts in January.

Marion J. Cerio

Cerio, 61, of Canastota, has practiced law for more than 30 years in Madison and Oneida counties, focusing on family court in addition to wills, real estate, and misdemeanor criminal and traffic matters. She holds degrees from SUNY Brockport and her Juris Doctorate from Syracuse University College of Law.

She’s been involved in many community activities and is currently president of the Canastota School Board and second vice president of the Canastota Lion’s Club.

The older sister of state Supreme Court Judge Don Cerio, she didn’t realize there was a judicial opening until DiStefano announced his retirement.
She is married to husband Vic Kopnitsky, and they have two children: Maria and Joe.

A member of the Madison and Oneida county bar associations, she is a member of the Attorney for Child panel, third Judicial Department since 1985; member of the Attorney for Child Panel, Fourth Judicial Department since 2001, representing children in Madison and Oneida counties.

She said a challenge Madison County has is that there are not enough resources. In neighboring counties, there are more resources for family court situations.

Now, she primarily does family court and has done surrogates work.

“Family court is what I do. There’s not a case imaginable that I have not done in family court,” she said.

Cerio thought about running for a county court judge spot for years. She said that during her campaign, it has been enlightening listening and talking to people.

“I enjoy everything about this job,” she said.

In family court, the work is varied, with adoptions, name changes, and custody. Sometimes criminal and family court cases intertwine.

She finds that one addresses things in a different way based on different specifics. Every case is different.

She has a strong commitment to the community. After college, she had the choice to move anywhere, but chose to return home to Canastota and Madison County.

“I was born here. My family lives here,” she said, adding that other places just weren’t home.

In a letter to the Madison County Democratic Committee declaring her decision to run, Cerio writes of an early childhood memory...“One of my earliest childhood memories growing up includes being in the midst of a celebration when my father was elected to the position of trustee in the Village of Canastota. As I grew older, I accompanied him at election time as petitions were passed, signs were put up, voters were called and elderly voters given rides to the polls.... My brother’s campaigns for Madison County District Attorney gave me the opportunity to again become involved in the local political process, an experience which I thoroughly enjoyed as it gave me the chance to meet and work with so many people in Madison County.”

Suzanne Knight-DeBottis

Knight-DeBottis, 48, of Oneida, has been a practicing lawyer since 2002. In addition to maintaining a private practice, she represents the Madison County Department of Social Services. Her work history includes serving as an attorney for Service Employees International Union. She is a member of the Madison County Bar Association and has held leadership positions in the organization. She holds a degree from Canisius College; a Master of Science Management in Human Service Administration from SUNY Buffalo; and a law degree from SUNY Buffalo Law School.

Throughout the campaign season, Knight-DeBottis has brought her daughter along the trail. As she has learned and listened, so has her daughter.

Knight-DeBottis said she’s experienced with family law. “It’s a big part of what goes on in Madison County.”
Over the years, she has worked on cases involving child abuse and neglect, as well as child support. She also has experience in surrogates, family, civil and criminal cases.

Deciding to run for judge was a natural progression for her, she said,

Judges should have what she calls the three C’s: “Commitment, Character and Community.”

She recently was designated as “qualified” in the Independent Judicial Election Qualification Commissions, a statewide network of independent screening panels for judicial candidates.

Like other candidates, she began thinking about a run after DiStefano retired in late April.

“It’s been a very interesting process,” she said. “It’s been a very intense process.”

She feels prepared and able to listen to both sides in order to apply the law.

Knight-DeBottis and her husband Peter C. DeBottis have an 8-year-old daughter Julia.

Patrick O'Sullivan

O’Sullivan, 55, of Cazenovia, has been a Nelson town judge for 10 years, and Cazenovia village judge for the past four years. For 22 years he has served as a trial lawyer, litigating civil and criminal matters across upstate New York. He also serves as an adjunct law professor at Syracuse University and adjunct professor in the Criminal Justice Department at Morrisville State College. He also is a partner at Goris & O’Sullivan in Cazenovia, and a member of the Madison and Onondaga County bar associations.

He and his wife, Susan, live in Nelson with their three children, Jacqueline, Hannah and Jake.

O’Sullivan received his law degree from Western Michigan University’s Cooley Law School in 1993, and is a member of the bar in New York and New Jersey.

O’Sullivan said he doesn’t enjoy politics; he wishes he could just hand in a resume, like a regular job application. It’s a lot of work to run for office. But it’s not all bad; campaigning has “been great talking to people,” he said from his Cazenovia law office one recent morning.

Like his opponents in the race for the three-hat judge seat (“Three-hat meaning hearing criminal, family and surrogates court cases), he started thinking about the spot as soon as DiStefano retired.

It only comes across once in a while, O’Sullivan says.

“I have been in every seat in the courtroom - prosecutor, defense, judge.” As a town justice he has held bench trials.

He has a heavy background in litigation.

“I would not have thrown my hat in the ring if I did not believe I had experience,” he said.

While he says judges, and those running for the position, cannot opine on issues, he understands from talking to people in the community that Second Amendment issues are a concern.

On the wall in his office, he looks at a quote from Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., at the time a Supreme Court justice, every day and ponders it:
“About 74 years ago I learned that I was not God. And so, when the people of the various states want to do something and I can’t find anything in the Constitution expressly forbidding it, I say, whether I like it or not: Damn it, let ’em do it.”

“It speaks mostly to my judicial disposition on most issues,” he said.

“I love the opportunity to be of service,” he said. “I am prepared.”

According to O’Sullivan, qualities that befit a judge are “Listen. Be calm. Be non-judgemental.”

Kathleen Rapasadi

Rapasadi, 48, of Canastota, is a graduate of Hobart and William Smith Colleges and Syracuse University College of Law. She lives in Lincoln with husband Mark Mancini; they are both lifelong residents of Madison County. They have a daughter, Alexandra, who is 8 years old.

Over the past 17 years, she has been employed as an assistant district attorney and deputy coroner with Madison County District Attorney’s Office. She has been a private-practice lawyer with her own practice since 1994, primarily focusing on family law.

She served on the New York State Advisory Committee Third Judicial Department for Attorneys for Children Appointed by Madison County Family Court Justice as the Madison County Liaison for Attorneys for Children. She’s been village attorney for Munnsville since 1995 and is past president of the Madison County Bar Association.

She was appointed by the Madison County Bar Association to the New York State Independent Judicial Election Qualification Committee, but has since stepped down.

She has been a member of the International Boxing Hall of Fame board since 2001.

She feels family court is the most tumultuous sector of county law and the most important. The bulk of county court cases are often family court, she said, and they can be “one of the most emotional parts of people’s lives.”

She said she is meticulous and committed to making sure things go right for her clients.

“That’s how I operate,” she said.

After years of working under a number of judges, she decided to run after DiStefano retired, and has received a lot of community support.

“It seemed to make sense,” she said of her decision.

If elected, she could see herself doing a lot of after-hours family court work.

“I see myself as a public servant... That’s something I have always wanted to keep,” she said.

The building her office is in was once a bank. Hanging on the walls are family photos including one from the 1950s that includes her grandfather, Isadore Rapasadi, standing with others in front of the building she now owns.