

Written by Kathy
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By Kathy Wray Coleman, associate publisher, editor

CLEVELAND, Ohio-Republican Judges Wanda Jones and Joan Synenberg (both pictured) lost their seats on the 34-member Cuyahoga County Common Pleas general division court via the November general election, Jones, who is Black, losing to former Cleveland Council President Kevin Kelley, who lost a nonpartisan mayoral runoff to current Mayor Justin Bibb by a landslide

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last year, and Synenberg losing to west side Cleveland Ward 11 Councilman Brian Mooney.

But one of two ousted common pleas judges of Cuyahogga County, which includes Cleveland, will get to stay on the bench anyway, at least for now.

Judge Synenberg, 65 and the wife of prominent defense attorney Roger Synenberg, has been appointed by GOP Gov Mike DeWine to complete Judge Deborah Turner's unexpired term, Turner, who is Black, winning another common pleas seat in November that keeps her on the bench until 2009 Turner would have been eligible in her current seat to seek upcoming reelection due to age limits.

Per state law, Ohio judges cannot run for judicial office beyond the ripe age of 70.

Synenberg must win a race in two more years for a full six-year term in order to hold on to her new seat.

Sources had said that either Synenberg or Jones would likely be selected by the governor to return to the common pleas bench in Cuyahoga County after losing election in the county, a Democratic stronghold, and DeWine chose Synenberg.

New judges Kelley and Mooney, who will began serving as common pleas judges in January, are Democrats, Kelley also a former vice chair of the county Democratic party who represented Cleveland's ward 13 from 2005-2022 when he was a city councilman .

Sources said that Synenberg was probably chosen by the governor to fill the unexpired term or vacancy left when Judge Turner sought and won another seat on the same common please bench last because she has better chance of later winning election to the full term, an expensive endeavor since campaigning for a common pleas judgeship in Ohio can be costly, particularly if you are a Republican in the heavily Democratic Cuyahoga County. Synenberg lost election in November to Mooney by roughly 700 votes, 49.8 percent to his 50.2 percent, according to official results of the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections, and Jones lost to Kelley 44 percent to his 56 percent.

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A former Cleveland Municipal Court judge, Synenberg has been on the common pleas bench since 2007, though she lost reelection in 2013 to current Democratic Judge Cassandra Collier Williams and was appointed back to the court by then Gov John Kasich. She later won election to a full term that concludes in January of 2023.

Currently one of three Black judges on the general division bench of Cuyahoga County, Jones was appointed to the court in December of 2021 to replace Joseph D. Russo, who suddenly died while in office. She previously served as a judge from January of 2019 to December of 2000, losing election to an unexpired term to Democratic Judge Richard Bell, who was elected in November to a full term relative to the seat.

Ohio judges are elected to six-year terms, and judicial races in Ohio are nonpartisan as to how a judge's name appears on the ballot. But technically they remain political, critics argue, and if Synenberg and Jones were Republican they would have had a far better chance of convincing voters to keep them on the bench in heavily Democratic Cuyahoga County. Also at issue is that voter turnout was at 47 percent the county, which was more helpful to Democrats in getting out the Democratic vote in a Democratic town, though it was down from 63 percent in 2016 when Donald Trump won for president.

Cuyahoga County is the second largest of Ohio's 88 counties and Cleveland, a largely Black major American city, is its largest city. Republicans, however, hold every statewide office, including the governor's office, other than three seats on the Ohio Supreme Court and a U.S. Senate seat held by Sen. Sherrod Brown of Cleveland, a seasoned member of Congress who is up for reelection in 2024.

The other U.S. Senate seat in Ohio will be held by Trump ally and political newcomer J.D. Vance, a venture capitalist, lawyer and author who will succeed retiring GOP Sen Rob Portman after winning the general election in November over outgoing congressman Tim Ryan, a longtime federal lawmaker out of the Youngstown area. Ryan ran for the U.S. Senate rather than for a congressional seat following redistricting that shut out a great part of his congressional district.

By Kathy Wray Coleman, associate publisher, editor-in-chief (Coleman is a former biology teacher and a seasoned Black journalist, and an investigative, legal, scientific,

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and political reporter who trained for 17 years at the Call and Post Newspaper in Cleveland, Ohio).

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