

IN MY OPINION**Caroline Porter****Qualifications critical in Circuit Clerk race**

Politics can be a touchy business, especially on the local level. It's easy to criticize candidates and officeholders who live in another town or state, someone whom you'll probably never meet. But when we get into local politics, it's another story. One who criticizes had better be prepared to meet his neighbor or community member face to face and have the courage of his convictions.

That's why people are often afraid to express their opinions — afraid of the consequences. Afraid of being shunned or losing business. I'm one of the few women my age who brags about my birthdays because after 40 years of making public statements and taking stands on issues, I'm just grateful to be alive.

There is an important fact about the race for Knox County Circuit Clerk that should be aired. This important county office, central to the judicial system and law enforcement in the county, has four separate offices in the courthouse; (1) the main office handling every kind of legal business, from passports and probate to child support; (2) traffic and misdemeanors; (3) felony and mental health cases (4) small

claims and juvenile cases. Longtime Circuit Clerk Mary Stein is retiring at the end of her term, so the position is open.

Dana Shallenberger, supervisor of the traffic court division for six years, and Circuit Clerk employee for 11 years, is the Democrat party candidate. Republican candidate Kelly Cheesman is a part-time employee in the felony division and has apparently been with the department for 20 years. According to records obtained from the Treasurer's office, Cheesman began a job-sharing position with the only other employee in the felony office ten years ago, working about 35 hours every two weeks.

Shallenberger supervises five other employees in an office that filed 12,000 cases last year and collected \$1.9 million in fines and fees. Shallenberger's office handles all traffic cases, ordinance violations and conservation violations. They also oversee the first three court appearances of felony cases. Adjacent to the courtroom on the first floor, the office is busy and well-organized in a space entirely too small for its function.

The office where Cheesman works basically deals with felony cases and

appeals and mental health cases. I met Kelly in the early '90s, when I was a reporter for the Quad-City Times and needed access to major court case files. She was always helpful.

But in the race for Circuit Clerk, it's important to note the difference in the jobs each candidate has performed in that office. I don't pretend to be objective in this race, most readers know I'm chair of the Knox County Democratic Central Committee and am certainly promoting Shallenberger, the Democratic candidate.

Nevertheless, she is clearly the most qualified to supervise the massive responsibilities of the Circuit Clerk's office. Shallenberger has worked fulltime for the last 11 years and six years as a supervisor of an office that deals with the public all day and under considerable pressure. Her opponent, Kelly Cheesman, has worked part time for the last ten years, along with one other employee in an office that serves the court system and does not usually deal directly with the public. I think voters deserve to know the difference.