

ARCHIVE

JUDGE FACES CHARGES OF MISCONDUCT

The JQC accuses a judge of fiscal violations with an exotic dancer.

By **COLLEEN JENKINS**

Published Nov. 14, 2009

An appeals judge who made history as Stetson University's first black law school graduate is in trouble with the state Judicial Qualifications Commission, accused of taking gifts from a stripper and helping hide her assets from creditors.

Judge Thomas E. Stringer Sr. is vowing to fight allegations that he violated judicial canons by accepting two Rolex watches, vacations to Las Vegas and New York City and a 2001 Mercedes from the exotic dancer but never reported the gifts on his financial disclosure forms. He also failed to repay her for a \$50,000 loan, according to formal misconduct charges filed Tuesday.

The accusations first made headlines last spring after Christy Yamanaka, a 47-year-old New York City stripper, told reporters that Stringer owed her money for an investment they made together on a Hawaiian property.

At the time, the judge's colleagues said those claims didn't fit with the man who had served on the bench without blemish since the early 1980s.

Now the judge faces more than tawdry speculation. If the charges against him are proved, he could be fined, suspended, reprimanded or removed from office.

Stringer, who hears appellate cases out of Hillsborough, Pinellas, Pasco and 11 other counties as a member of the 2nd District Court of Appeal, had no comment Tuesday. He previously acknowledged to the St. Petersburg Times that he had been a friend and business partner of Yamanaka, but denied any wrongdoing.

On Tuesday, his attorney did the talking.

"I can tell you that both Judge Stringer and I, as well as many of his friends there, are extremely disappointed with the action taken by the JQC," said Fort Lauderdale lawyer J. David Bogenschutz.

The JQC took Stringer to task for entering into a series of financial transactions with Yamanaka despite knowing about the money problems she faced.

They had become friends in 1995 after meeting at what was then Malio's restaurant on Dale Mabry Highway. They kept in touch on and off after she moved away.

In 2000, Yamanaka filed for bankruptcy in Las Vegas. A judge threw out her petition and ordered her to pay creditors about \$315,000.

According to the JQC, Stringer referred Yamanaka to his son, a lawyer, for help.

Then, starting in 2004, the judge provided her with access to bank accounts opened in his name to keep her assets and income out of the reach of creditors, the JQC said. He listed himself as the sole title holder on a residence in Hawaii that Yamanaka helped purchase.

"Throughout your involvement with the Hawaiian residence, from the time it was transferred to your name in 2004 through its sale in 2007, your actions were designed to hide Ms. Yamanaka's interest in the property from others, including her judgment creditors," the charging documents state.

Stringer, who is married, also stands accused of leasing an apartment in New York for his stripper friend and allowing her to pay rent in cash.

During a trip to the city, the JQC said, Yamanaka paid for his stay at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel and his food. The judge did not disclose the gifts on his financial filings.

According to the charges, Stringer accepted a customized, four-door black Mercedes from Yamanaka that also was not reported on his financial disclosures. The JQC said he hid from the state the name of the true owner who had transferred the vehicle to him and did not pay the required Florida sales taxes.

Yamanaka referred all questions Tuesday to her Madison Avenue lawyer.

"Obviously, this validates Christy's version of events, which are corroborated by independent documents," attorney Joe Tacopina said. "And obviously the committee found her credible."

Indeed, Yamanaka's credibility will be central to the case, said Stringer's attorney. But Bogenschutz, who plans to take her deposition, finds it suspect.

"A lot of this has got to be coming directly from her," he said. "It colors what you find on documents that don't have a voice of their own. We take a different view, and may be able to prove that."

Stringer was appointed to serve as a county judge in 1984. Three years later, he became Hillsborough County's first black circuit judge. Former Gov. Jeb Bush elevated him to the appellate bench in February 1999.

The judge has 20 days to reply to the charges. He will continue to hear cases while his own is pending, though the 2nd DCA's chief judge said Stringer's colleagues can cover for him if he needs to take some time off.

"It's really going to be up to him," said Judge Stevan T. Northcutt. "He does a good job around here."

Times staff writer Lucy Morgan contributed to this report. Colleen Jenkins can be reached at cjenkins@sptimes.com or (813) 226-3337.