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Palm Beach County judicial candidates face off at Kravis luncheon

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WEST PALM BEACH —

Primed to puff up their own qualifications and credentials, two opponents in a contentious judicial race were thrown a curve Wednesday when they were asked to say something nice about each other.

“I was thinking we were going to talk about me,” Palm Beach County Circuit Court Judge Diana Lewis said, garnering chuckles from the roughly 80 who gathered for the luncheon meeting of the Economic Forum.

After a long pause, Lewis praised the apparent good health of her opponent, Jessica Ticktin, who two months ago gave birth to her second child. Ticktin, in turn, gave what appeared to be grudging credit to Lewis for her years of public service. “She has been a judge,” she said. But at every opportunity, Ticktin quickly returned to the recurring theme of her campaign to oust the two-term judge: In a Palm Beach County Bar Association poll of its members, lawyers gave Lewis low marks for impartiality, demeanor and common sense.

Lewis didn’t respond or point out that the Judicial Practices Commission of the Bar Association earlier this month had chided Ticktin for using the poll inappropriately. However, in an interview this week, Lewis said the evaluation is misleading because only a fraction of the roughly 6,500 lawyers in the county participated. Also, because she oversees probate and foreclosure cases, many of the attorneys she deals with are from outside the county and therefore can’t participate.

Lewis talked about her 20 years of experience as a civil attorney, specializing in medical malpractice and product liability, before taking the bench in 2003. Ticktin, who graduated from law school the same year, talked about her work for her father’s Deerfield Beach law firm, where she said she oversees 24 attorneys and 4,500 cases in 10 offices statewide.

The biggest battle over experience in the Aug. 26 judicial races was between those campaigning to replace longtime Circuit Judge Lucy Chernow Brown, who is retiring. Having practiced for 30 years with a board certification in marital and family law, Peggy Rowe-Linn claimed she is far more qualified than her opponents Maxine Cheesman and Jaimie Goodman. She said she has handled hundreds of cases, scores of appeals, three jury trials and more than 200 trials before judges.

During audience questions, Rowe-Linn’s husband asked Goodman why people should vote for him since he’s never tried a case in the county. Goodman, a former in-house counsel for General Motors who is now a sole

practitioner specializing in employment cases, bristled. He said he has tried two cases in federal court here. One ended in a mistrial and another was resolved before the jury reached a verdict. When in private practice in Detroit, he said he tried 26 cases— many more than the other three. “I think your facts are inaccurate,” he told Rowe-Linn’s husband.

Cheesman, who went to law school while working as a chemist for the South Florida Water Management District, said such arguments miss the point. “I think we’re all qualified,” said Cheesman, who has been in private practice for nine years. “The issue is not how many jury trials or bench trials you’ve had. There’s more than that to being a judge. As a judge you’re an advocate for justice. You need to be impartial. I have the respect of my peers.”