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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Colleagues and well-wishers applaud newly sworn-in Judge Kathleen Akao on Wednesday.

Akao takes oath, makes history

By MAY WONG
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SANTA CRUZ — It's official: Kathleen Akao is the first woman and the first Asian-American to serve on the county's Superior Court bench.

Akao, 46, was formally sworn in Wednesday by Superior Court Judge Tom Black before an overflow crowd in the Board of Supervisors Chamber. She was elected in June, defeating incumbent George Kovacevich.

The ceremony was a historic event. Akao's seat on a bench occupied in the past only by middle-age white men marks a milestone not only in the county but also in Northern California.

Only a month into the job, Akao already has won the respect of her colleagues.

"I think we hit a home run here. She'll be an excellent jurist, and it'll be nice to have that diversity in the court," said Municipal Court Judge Tom Kelly.

Though her elected term officially

starts in January, Akao started working Oct. 31 after Gov. Pete Wilson appointed her to fill in after Kovacevich's early departure.

Her first taste of judicial power has been challenging, Akao said.

"But it's a lot easier than having to sit and wait for a verdict," she said.

Akao was a county counsel for eight years. Before that, she was a public defender for Santa Clara County and was in private practice in San Jose. She was also a staff attorney for the Asian Law Alliance from 1982-85.

"I love having a woman here, and I think it'll be great for the court," said court administrator Christine Patton.

Patton and others say they are thankful for the ethnic and gender diversity Akao brings to the local justice system, but more importantly, they say, they respect her character.

Black, who hugged Akao after administering the oath, called her a woman with deep convictions, high intelligence, strong will and a high degree of

professionalism.

"Kathy's a product of her Japanese traditions — and I mean that in the best way — with her industriousness, her character and thoughtfulness. That's in contrast to me. I say things too often and too loud," Black said. "Kathy is really going to be an outstanding Superior Court judge."

Akao's voice may be softer than other judges', but her demeanor is just as firm. She won't stand for unnecessary delays in proceedings and will prod — albeit gently — lawyers whose lines of questioning veer off course.

Before Wednesday's ceremony, for example, Akao presided over a hearing in which prosecutors were seeking to try a teen-ager as an adult on attempted murder charges.

Perched on the bench, she listened intently and ruled thoughtfully on the lawyers' objections, often giving the reasoning behind her decision. She allowed lawyers their say, but wouldn't let their comments drag on.