

Defender seeks to give back

By Shelley Koppel
Staff writer

PGA VILLAGE — Diamond Litty, public defender for the 19th Judicial Circuit and PGA Village resident, did not set out to be a lawyer.

"I was going to school at Rollins College in Winter Park," she said. "At that time, I was a theater and drama major. There was a senator on trial in Orlando. I didn't have a car and I remember paying people to take me to see the trial. I'd never seen one. I saw it for the first time and said, 'Oh, my gosh, that's what I want to do.' I wanted to be a trial lawyer. I got the bug."

Litty, who was raised on the Treasure Coast and attended St. Anastasia and John Carroll High School, changed her major to political science. She graduated from Nova Law School in Fort Lauderdale in 1981.

The newly minted attorney began her career as a prosecutor, working as an assistant state attorney. Then she opened the first all-female law firm in St. Lucie County. While she loved being



Diamond Litty

a prosecutor, she found herself drawn to the defense side.

"It drew me in," she said. "I ran for public defender in 1992. There is no job like this. It is the pinnacle of my professional life. I loved being a prosecutor and I loved private practice, but being public defender is where my heart is."

One of Litty's first priorities as public defender was the collection of fees for the office.

"At the time, there was a law that attorney's fees would be assessed if the defendant were convicted," Litty said. "No one was doing it, but it is the right thing to do. The fees are small: \$100 or less for a misdemeanor and \$500 in a felony."

Litty's office began collecting the fees and she noticed a change.

"You rarely hear, 'I want a real lawyer,' she said. "They are paying for this service. It changed our time and she noticed a change."

Litty said that some \$40 million has been collected since her election.

"The money goes to the state to fund my office," she said. "We are one of the only self-funding offices in the state of Florida. We pay for ourselves."

Litty is particularly proud of a program her office has instituted to help people who have served their sentences become productive citizens. One is the Offender Re-entry program.

"We help people who want help," she said. "It's difficult, when you're released, to get on the right track, build resumes,

get jobs and get housing. St. Lucie County Sheriff Mosquera and our office have programs in jails to help with addiction, anger management and employment skills."

The Journey Forward program is another leg up for offenders.

"It's 90 days and they choose to go through it," Ms. Litty said. "I did not want it court-ordered. It's for people who truly want to change their lives. We're not wasting time. We want to (use) our time and talent to people who want to make a difference in their lives. It's for non-violent county jail prisoners."

The program's recidivism rate is 7 to 13 percent, much lower than rates for prisoners without assistance in re-entry and skill building. Still, there was a gap. To that end, Litty's office started a charitable organization LifeBuilders, three years ago.

"So often, someone will go through the class and get their life back on track," she said. "They're on their way to success and they get a job, but they can't

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accept it because they don't have work boots or money to buy them. It was a gap public funding did not address. You can't take county or state funding. We recently had our second annual golf tournament and raised \$38,000."

"It may mean an extra \$200 (for someone) for this month's rent because a son was sick," Litty said. "It can help them keep on the path. We do the research, that they are indeed doing the right thing. It's a hand-up, not a hand-out. Only those that deserve to be helped are helped."

Litty's office also makes wide use of volunteer investigators. Using both college interns and other volunteers, the investigators help with client interviews and other matters.

"With all the budget cuts, and even before, we did not have the money for investigators," Ms. Litty said. "It's saved the taxpayers millions of dollars with hundreds of thousand of investigative hours. Students receive training and have to give back volunteer hours. Even after they've given back hours, they stay on."

Others, such as former law enforcement personnel, also volunteer to contribute to the community.

"We have a strong volunteer force in this office," Litty said.

"We have promoted that. When I was growing up in this community, so many people helped. I want to give

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back. I could never be where I am without the help of people who believed in me and gave me opportunities. I feel a personal obligation to do the same thing."

In her private life, Litty is married to Tom Walsh, a county court judge. He does not handle criminal cases, so there is no conflict. They have a son, Blaze, whose name is a legacy of Litty's own.

"My daddy marched to a different drummer," Litty said. "He was a unique individual. He said for as long as he could remember, he wanted to have a daughter and name her Diamond. I named our son Blaze because a unique name is a benefit."

For more information about the programs offered by the Public Defender's office, visit the website, www.pd19.org