

PENNDDEL

Wardrobe change for undercover cop

Former Middletown Detective Daniel Baranoski replaces Joseph P. Falcone as a district judge.

By BEN FINLEY COURIER TIMES

His lucky ball cap, the one stained with blood from an undercover job that went horribly awry, is gone. The jeans and Harley T-shirts are retired. Wingtips poked out from his fitted, black robe. On his first day as a district judge Tuesday, Daniel Baranoski barely resembled the undercover cop who, a little more than a year ago, was buying heroin from gun-wielding gang members. The exception was his goatee. And even that offered about as much menace as a baseball pitcher's stubble.

"Step right up," he said with a smile in the courtroom. A couple of men approached, wanting to discuss their traffic violations. He shook their hands.

Baranoski was elected in November as district judge of Court 07-1-07 in Penndel. Before that, he was a cop in Middletown for 23 years, spending some of his time undercover.

During one job in the 1990s, a criminal caught on to Baranoski and severely beat him and left him for dead. Baranoski recovered, keeping the blood-stained ball cap he was wearing as a reminder and good luck charm.

He led his last undercover case in October 2006, a wellpublicized bust of several Bloods gang members selling heroin. The job, and the media coverage, preceded the detective's uncontested race for judge.

District judges, whose salaries start at \$60,031 a year, conduct preliminary arraignments and hearings and set bail in criminal cases. They hold trials for summary offenses and have jurisdiction over civil cases that don't exceed \$8,000.

"We see everything — from traffic violations to criminal cases to fish and wildlife to health code violations," Baranoski said with excitement.

"I like working in the system. I can still help people," he said.

Baranoski's court will oversee half of Middletown as well as the boroughs of Penndel, Hulmeville, Langhorne and Langhorne Manor. He replaces Joseph P. Falcone, a district judge who has moved to new digs on Bristol Road in Bensalem, a jurisdiction that will be split between him and District Judge Leonard Brown.

The fact that Baranoski busted a bunch of drug dealers and gang members only blocks from his court in Penndel doesn't seem to bother the 43-year-old. But he admitted his staff apparently is a little worried. They declined to comment.

"I very rarely carried a gun as a cop, and I'm going to have one now," Baranoski said. He then revealed a small gadget under his desk, the kind a president's daughter might carry in a Hollywood movie, which alerts police with a push of a button.

"All the clerks have one, too," he said.

Today, Baranoski will deal with his first criminal cases as a judge. He said that has some people worried.

"Somebody said to me, 'If you were a police officer, you're going to want to find everybody guilty,' and that's not true. Everybody gets their day in court," Baranoski said in his chambers.

Tuesday morning was proof of that, he said. He found two people not guilty on traffic violations.

Baranoski said Falcone, his fellow DJ, offered a piece of advice.

"If you find everybody guilty, there wouldn't be any reason to have judges," he said.





Constable Mike Gallagher (right) congratulates District Justice Dan Baranoski, who started his new job Tuesday in Penndel.

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