

MINUTES

THE JUICE ON ALL THINGS ESSENTIAL

Setting the tone

U.S. District Attorney Jeffrey Collins has confronted terrorism and the McNamara investigation. But what he really wants is to build bridges in the community.

BY JACK LESSENBERRY

He was in his chambers reading on the morning the world changed, trying to catch up on case law on a day the Michigan Court of Appeals wasn't in session.

Jeffrey Collins was trying not to think much about his pending nomination to be U.S. District Attorney. Officially, the title is United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Michigan. Actually, it is the major federal law-enforcement job in this part of the world, with jurisdiction over more than 7 million people.

James Madison had appointed the first eastern district D.A. when Michigan was still a territory. Now Collins was poised to become the first African-American Republican in history to hold the job — as long as he was confirmed by the U.S. Senate. There wasn't any reason to think he wouldn't be, but things were lagging, and the Democrats were in control.

Nothing his lifelong nervous energy could do about that. So, as usual, Collins bounded out of bed at 5:30 that beautiful late-summer morning, ran his three to five miles, showered, kissed Lois and the kids goodbye and headed to court. Without his robes, he might have had a hard time convincing people he was a judge. Though balding gracefully, he still looks more like the college tennis star he'd been. There wasn't, and isn't, a visible gram of fat on his 5-foot-7-inch frame. It's easier to imagine a bartender carding him than guessing he's 42.



Oakland Circuit Judge Denise Langford-Morris, who went to the same elementary school. But the nation was about to find out how much it didn't know.

There was a knock on the door. One of the law clerks. He was sorry to interrupt, but ... two planes had just flown into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York. "The landscape changed," Jeffrey Collins says. Everything, he soon realized, was going to be very different.

He never has been a headline grabber. His face is still relatively unknown to the general public. But those who follow law enforcement would know Jeffrey Collins' name a hectic year later.

Three-quarters of his time had been spent on work — some public, most not — on matters stemming from the events forever known simply as 9-11.

But there were plenty of other things, too. There Jeffrey Collins was last spring, handing down indictments, first against University of Michigan "booster" Ed Martin, then against once-golden basketball star Chris Webber.

Days after the November election, he signed the long-rumored orders that sent federal agents swarming over Wayne County government headquarters. They seized computer hard drives and photocopied well into the night an endless stream of paper in the majestic old courthouse.

Aging political boss Ed McNamara stood stunned and blinking, looking like a shelled turtle in the headlights of a semi. "I hope it isn't politically