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 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 love 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 the feel of public defending."

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 Defender 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's Masonic 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 LiveBuilds, three years ago. "You often, someone will go through the crafts 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 move in, because the house is occupied."

"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 thousands of investigative hours. Students receive training and have to give back volunteer hours. Even after they've given back hours, they stay on."

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