

# The Miami Herald

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## MIAMI-DADE COURTS

# Friends aid clerk paralyzed in crash

■ Friends from the legal community come to the aid of a longtime clerk with the Miami-Dade County Courthouse who was paralyzed in a car accident this summer.

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Tuesdays are hell in the Miami-Dade County Courthouse.

And Gemma Stafford misses Tuesdays more than anything.

On June 29, Stafford was on her way from her Miramar home to the courthouse when her 1997 Geo Tracker was cut off by a gold Grand Am. The Geo flipped three, maybe four times.

The Grand Am sped off — Stafford isn't even sure the driver knows about the havoc that had been caused.

Stafford, 55, was left paralyzed from the waist down.

For the first time in her 24 years working at the courthouse as a clerk, Stafford has been unable to work.

"I miss the hustle and bustle," Stafford said. "Especially Tuesday, everyone is trying to get to their case on time, the elevators are overcrowded, it's crazy in there, but I love it."

South Florida attorneys and judges are coming to the aid of their friend, by donating to a trust fund set up for

• TURN TO CLERK, 2B

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LILLY ECHEVERRIA/HERALD STAFF

**SET UP FUND:** Attorney Alan Goldfarb, who is leading the effort to help Gemma Stafford, visits her at her Pembroke Pines home. She was left paralyzed from the waist down in an automobile accident.

## Friends aid injured clerk

\*CLERK, FROM 1B

Stafford by Miami attorney Alan Goldfarb.

"It doesn't matter what side you're on — prosecutors, defense lawyers, judges — every one loves her," Goldfarb said. "I've never met someone so universally loved in the courthouse."

Goldfarb solicited donations through a letter he sent to more than 4,300 lawyers in the Dade County Bar Association. He said to date \$22,000 has been collected. Stafford is insured, but her insurance only covers up to 24 physical therapy sessions a year — not nearly enough said Goldfarb.

Goldfarb would like to collect enough money for Stafford to purchase a motorized wheelchair and a specially-equipped van.

The details of her accident do not escape Stafford.

After her car flipped, she was able to see herself in the rear view mirror — without her black wig. She stretched

her hands to reach the wig and put it back on.

"I was not going to have the police arrive and see me without my hair," said Stafford.

"Typical Gemma," Goldfarb said, laughing.

When she was loaded onto the ambulance, the first thing the emergency medical technician noticed, as do most who meet Stafford — were her naturally grown nails, more than five inches long.

The second thing: her boots.

"He said, 'Goddamn, you got some pretty boots,'" Stafford recalled.

The burgundy Tony Lama cowboy boots, size 7½, remain intact, part of a collection of cowboy boots Stafford would wear to work. She recalls how she would run in them from her office on the 15th floor to the 11th floor to pick up faxes and down to the sixth floor for court, where it was her job to instruct the jury on their duties, swear in

witnesses and review all evidence submitted in a case.

"It feels empty without her there," Goldfarb said. "I would always run into Gemma running from one place to another, taking care of business. I've always said she's the heart of the courtroom."

Stafford's absence has been felt in the courtroom of Senior Judge Herbert Stettin. "While we managed," said Stettin, referring to his most recent cases without Stafford, "it wasn't the same thing, it wasn't as efficient, it wasn't as fun."

The judges are nearly as eager for Stafford to return to work as she is. They point out that the sixth-floor courtrooms are wheelchair accessible.

After the accident, Stafford spent a month at Memorial Regional Hospital in Hollywood undergoing surgeries and other treatments she did not want to be told anything about.

"I did not want to know what they were doing, when they were doing it," said Stafford. "I just told [the doctors] to do whatever they needed to do. It was easier that way."

Today, Stafford spends at least two days a week at the hospital, getting MRI tests and X-rays taken.

At home, she receives care from her partner Clewis Wright Jr., 57, and her four children Jassmine, 22; Charles, 24; Quentin, 29, and Nichelle, 36. They take turns bathing her, massaging and performing motion exercises with her legs, making sure Stafford takes a series of 10 medications and keeping up with her medical appointments, which they organized on a chart.

Stafford said she has some feeling in her thighs, which doctors tell her is a promising sign.

"I don't plan on being in this chair forever," Stafford said. "Believe me I'm going to be out."