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Mock trial puts students in middle of police excessive force debate

By Allison Dikanovic
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Rows of spectators sit silently as a young woman's inflection rises and voice bellows in an emotional monologue.

Her costume is a black blazer and horn-rimmed glasses. Her stage is an ornate courtroom, and her co-stars are her professionally clad classmates. Her message: Police are accountable to protect and serve their community.

Students representing six high schools in the Milwaukee area debated a case involving excessive force by a police officer in this year's regional mock trial competition held Saturday at the federal courthouse. It was one of several competition sites in the state for the Mock Trial Tournament sponsored by the State Bar of Wisconsin.

"We try to choose hot-button issues that are of interest to the students," said Emily Lonergan, co-chair of the mock trial program. "There have been a number of excessive force cases dealing with police officers in the news over the past year."

The personal injury case created for the competition involved a young man, perceived to be homeless, being approached by a police officer on a park bench, drawing similarities to the Dontre Hamilton case in Milwaukee.

"This case relates to events going on in society," said Pilar Sharp, a sophomore at Pius XI High School who aspires to become a lawyer.

Dave Turek, an attorney and coordinator of the mock trial event, said the case was designed "to give ammunition to both sides" to produce lively debate and not a clear winner.

Each student team, consisting of three "lawyers" and three "witnesses," had to develop arguments for each side of the case. Throughout the day in different rounds, teams represented both the plaintiff and defendant positions.

Lonergan said that the mock trial program pushes students to analyze an issue from different perspectives.

"I've learned to take both sides into account," said Bruno Pruhs, a freshman at Whitefish Bay High School. "It can be seen both ways."

Sharp agreed. She said it was a challenge at first to embrace the role she had received on her team as the attorney defending the police department.

"At first, I wanted to be an attorney for the plaintiff, but this way, I got to understand the defense's point of view," she said.

Weeks of preparation

Students began meeting in the fall to strategize for the competition. Many of the teams practiced multiple times a week after school. They received a formal complaint and affidavits for each of the witnesses in the case to use as material to craft their arguments.

"It was cool to learn the terminology and procedures of the courtroom," said Cory Ehlenbach, a junior at Pius XI.

Turek said the mock trial replicates a real case and trial, giving students an idea of how the court system works.

"It's a pretty accurate glimpse, pretty close to the real deal," Turek said.

Teams from Whitefish Bay, Salem, Pius XI, St. Joan Antida, Milwaukee Academy of Science and Shorewood high schools prepared their statements and examinations, practicing their delivery to impress the judges. Each of the four rounds offered another chance for the teams to make their arguments even stronger.

"In mock trial, you get put on the spot," Ehlenbach said. "There's a lot of improvisation."

The trials were judged by federal and state judges in Milwaukee County and were scored by lawyers who volunteered their time.

"It is amazing to see high school kids engage in a trial like they are real lawyers," Turek said, explaining why judges and organizers continue to work with the program year after year. "They think on their feet, making objections and arguing with the judges on the spot."

In the midst of heated debate, students improve critical thinking, confidence in public speaking and problem-solving.

Shorewood teams finished first and second. The winning team advances to the state level competition on March 12.

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