

DARING TO BE DARROWS

San Diego High School Mock Trial Competition

By Renée Galente



In 1980 the Constitutional Rights Foundation, a non-profit, non-partisan, organization dedicated to educating America's young people about the importance of civic participation in a democratic society, introduced its Mock Trial program to all the counties in California. High schools compete within each participating county to send a champion to the State Competition. In 1984, the program expanded to send state champions to a national competition.

The program helps students acquire a working knowledge of our judicial system, develop analytical abilities and communication skills, and gain an understanding of their obligations and responsibilities as participating members of society.

In a brief overview, participating schools receive a criminal fact pattern each fall, in the September/October time frame. The students then work for up to six months with a teacher coach and one or two attorney coaches in learning about the judicial branch, the courtroom, the trial

process and develop both a prosecution and defense team that competes the next year in February/March.

San Diego County again became a participating county in 2007, with five participating schools competing for the title of San Diego County High School Mock Trial Champions. A prior run at sustaining a countywide program failed.

By 2010, the renewed program was up to twelve participating schools. The following year, Superior Court of California, County of San Diego Judge Yvonne E. Campos volunteered and presided over one of the trials. "I was excited by the kids and the entire program," she recalls, "and I stayed for the finals." During the competition she ran into a friend whose child was participating. Judge Campos heard the parent's feedback, and had her own, which she took to Julie Myres, the Court's Community Outreach Program Manager who was overseeing the program together with Michelle Chavez at the San Diego County Bar Association.

One thing led to another and in short order Judge Campos was asked to co-chair

the Bench/Bar Project, a partnership of the SDCBA and the San Diego Superior Court, with Judge Linda Quinn (Ret.). For Judge Campos, accepting the position was an easy decision. "When I was in high school," she said, "I was able to do a lot of things because of opportunities provided by people in the community. It was time to pay it forward." For Judge Quinn (Ret.), when the opportunity came up to help out on the committee, she had no hesitation. "I got involved in the High School Mock Trial program judging the trials about eight years ago. I had helped out with many law school mock trials over the decades, but never saw such commitment, enthusiasm and joy as I did with the high-schoolers," she said.

The Committee aimed to: 1) stabilize funding as budgets shifted and 2) grow the program allowing for more student participation.

Addressing funding, Judge Campos noted that "it was a huge priority to try to keep this program in place as an important part of the Court's community outreach." The two co-chairs were determined to keep the program going and had the unwavering support of the Presiding Judge, first Judge Robert Trentacosta and later Judge David Danielsen. Adding to that challenge was that public school systems were also facing massive cutbacks, to the point where San Diego Unified was even contemplating cutting extracurricular activities including athletics.

In order to be sustained, the program first needed to be established as relevant and needed to be able to completely cover its own costs. The small fee paid by schools for their participation goes primarily to the Constitutional Rights Foundation, leaving certain costs each year in order to run the program ranging from bottles of water for the participants, to awards, to the cost of after hours security. These costs are paid for through donations earmarked for the Mock Trial Program through the San Diego Justice Foundation, a 501 (c)

(3) dedicated to improving and advancing the administration of justice by assisting programs of the Superior Court of California in and for the County of San Diego.

As a result, Judge Quinn (Ret.)'s work on the committee was, and continues to be, instrumental since judges cannot fundraise. Judge Quinn, as a retired judge and attorney representative on the committee, was able to bring in outside support for the program, reaching out to bar organizations and other sources to help keep the program running.

The next step was to stabilize the program. To do so, Judge Campos and Judge Quinn (Ret.) attended state finals on their own time to learn from them and see what they needed to provide local competitors to have as good a chance as anyone else to go to the state competition and succeed.

They also focused on one of the most difficult aspects of the competition: the scoring. Feedback since the inception of

scanner scoring program purchased through donations now allows for rapid and accurate calculations after each round of competition.

Once stabilized, the committee also worked to grow the competition. "We got a lot of feedback from the coaches and so we had a number of goals," said Judge Campos.

The first was to increase participation. Some growth occurs through word of mouth in the community. One school, for instance, had its students approach the administration asking to join after seeing their friends compete and wanting to be able to compete with, and against, them. They heard about the program via social media. Other growth is cultivated. In order to make sure that the program is accessible to all interested schools, those schools that cannot afford the entry fee to participate may seek to have it waived. Many schools also fundraise through bake sales and car washes in order to participate.

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prepare, 179 attorney scorers volunteered, and 60 courtroom monitors including JusticeCorps students, law students and paralegals, made sure that everything went smoothly in the courtrooms.

2015 will have 25 participating schools from all over the county. "The more we make it available to schools throughout the entire county, the more the entire county's population is able to participate. From high-end prep schools to continuation schools, the beauty of the High School Mock Trial program is that everyone participating is on the same journey. Everyone learns. Everyone gets better. Everyone gets more polished," said Judge Campos.

Another goal was to bring the competition up-to-date. This year marks several advances in the administration of the competition, really bringing it to the next level. Deputy District Attorney Jim Koerber acts as in-house webmaster for the committee's first dedicated website



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the program strongly demanded open and transparent scoring of the competition versus a subjective decision as to who is "winning." For just this reason, the aid of Magistrate Judge David Bartick was enrolled to spearhead standardizing the attorney scoring aspect of the competition. Magistrate Judge Bartick self-describes as being passionate about the Mock Trial program, having personally seen how it can instill confidence and self-esteem in the students, literally changing their lives. With his leadership, the committee worked to make sure volunteer attorney scorers are trained on criteria and standards and strives to ensure that there is no appearance of impropriety or favoritism at the competition. "Because everyone puts so much time and energy into this competition, we want them to know that we've worked to make it as objective as possible," said Judge Campos. An optical

High School program increased to 26 participating schools from all corners of the county. 2014 also saw the implementation of something the participants had asked for: four rounds of competition, thus enabling each team to compete twice for prosecution and twice for defense. While four rounds is physically demanding and exhausting for the participants and the volunteers, the students revel in the opportunity to go twice, and having the opportunity to employ what they learned from their first round in the second.

But the ability to continue providing four rounds depends on significant volunteerism. In San Diego all the trials are presided over by judicial officers, which is not the case in many counties and something of which San Diego should be proud. Last year 51 state and federal trial judges and commissioners presided over 53 trials, 68 attorney coaches helped the teams

www.sdmocktrial.org, which allows the committee to provide information digitally to students, teachers and coaches and saves staff time and the costs in using and organizing paper.

Another technological advancement started this year will streamline the volunteer process. Instead of attorney scorers needing to call or e-mail staff to determine what date and times were available for scoring that met their schedule, now attorney scorers can easily see what competitions dates need scorers online and can schedule themselves quickly and efficiently through Sign Up Genius. Courtroom monitors can also self-schedule via Sign Up Genius. Once signed up, it's critically important that volunteers show up and follow through. 📌

FROM THE LAWYER COACHES



Eric Ganci, King Chavez High School Attorney Coach

"As a former teacher, I can say this program is one of the absolute best ways to give back. The students really want to talk to lawyers and they want to see what it feels like to be a lawyer. This program gives them the chance to prep and try a case, with real legal issues in an actual courtroom with a sitting judge. The kids eat up the opportunity and fully invest themselves."

Victor Torres, St. Augustine Attorney Coach

"I volunteered as an attorney scorer the very first year of the competition. I was so impressed with the ability, the preparation and the performance of the young men and women that the following year I volunteered to be an attorney coach. This will be my third team over the past seven years and I absolutely love it! The opportunity to interact with the students is what keeps me coming back year after year."



Christopher Todd, Scripps Ranch High Attorney Coach

"This is my sixth year as a coach. It is so fun to see the students develop. They learn to stand up, solidly and with good balance, for their client's rights. They speak with conviction. They gently control the opposing witness. They respectfully address the court. They develop confidence and pride they didn't know they had. The Mock Trial program is amazing. The Bar and Court are to be commended for their organization of it and high participation level. It gives the students a real-world experience which can't be matched."

Michael Flemming, Cathedral Catholic High School Attorney Coach

"I got involved because I think it essential that we all know our constitutional rights and how the criminal law system works. I thought it would be cool to teach the kids about the judicial branch and court process. By the end of the first week of my first year, I realized I had learned more than I taught. And I have continued to learn something new every year."



Brandon Saxon, Torrey Pines High School Attorney Coach

"This is my sixth year coaching Torrey Pines. I started doing it to give back to my alma mater, and have really enjoyed the experience of working with the kids and seeing their stellar interest in the law and amazing skills, something I didn't have in high school! It's invigorating to see a motivated group of students work so hard for so many months in advance of the competition and really get into the material, which can be quite daunting. It's an amazing competition. Hats off to all the sitting judges and volunteer attorneys who score the competition."

Special thanks to the 2014-2015 San Diego County High School Mock Trial Committee for their year-round work:

Hon. Yvonne Campos, Co-Chair; Hon. Linda Quinn (Ret.) Co-Chair; Hon. David Bartick; Alex Calero, Esq.; DPD Solomon Chang, Esq.; Michelle Chavez; DDA Melissa Diaz, Esq.; SJ Kalian; Amy Kimpel, Esq.; DDA James Koerber, Esq.; Hon. Melinda Lasater, ex officio; David Leshner, Esq.; Ellen Miller-Sharp; Lourdes Morales; Julie Myres; Julie Schwartz; and Amber Scott.

Volunteer to be a scorer in this year's competition!

Visit <http://sdmocktrial.org>!

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