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Mock trials offer serious lessons

BY GLORIA PADILLA : AUGUST 9, 2013 : Updated: August 9, 2013 4:53pm

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It was a 10-2 guilty verdict for the young driver charged with vehicular manslaughter in a texting-while-driving case earlier this month as some 40 teenagers participated in a mock jury trial in juvenile court in Judge **Lisa Jarrett's** 436th District Court.

Never mind that jury verdicts have to be unanimous in criminal court cases. The intent of the exercise was to give the teens an insight into how the judicial system works while stressing the serious implications of texting while driving.

For two weeks, the participants in the court drama, members of the **Claude Black Youth Leadership Institute** summer program, prepared for their roles as jurors, witnesses, lawyers, defendant and bailiff with the judge and community volunteers.

The students had been hoping for a spectacular murder case for their mock trial, but it was decided it would be more beneficial if they had to consider the serious consequences of texting and driving, especially if they had to deal with a case involving the death of a backseat passenger.

It was a quick trial, lasting about 90 minutes. The lively spectators kept the mock bailiff, dressed in an oversized Sheriff's Office windbreaker, on his feet calling for order in the court.

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The judge gave the jury only 20 minutes to deliberate but had to send them back when the jury verdict was not unanimous. After an additional 10 minutes of deliberation, when it became clear there would not be a consensus, the judge allowed the majority to rule. As the verdict was read, the girl who played the role of the defendant's mom called out, "I love you, son."

Jury rooms are off-limits to judges during deliberations, but in this mock trial Jarrett went in to facilitate the timed deliberations.

"They started out with their arms crossed and shouting at each other," she said. But they began to make headway after she asked them to voice their opinion on the case. Jury dynamics are always interesting. One juror for acquittal did not want to convict because the defendant was his brother, and another thought the defendant did not deserve to be convicted for an unintentional loss of life.

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While entertaining, it was an eye-opening experience for the students, most of whom had never set foot inside a courtroom. There were lessons that don't come out of a textbook. The jurors expressed surprise to learn how difficult it is to reach a verdict, and some students were nervous to be sitting before a judge even for a mock trial.

Jarrett recalled with a laugh how disappointed she was losing a case as the prosecutor in a mock trial back in eighth grade. The loss prompted her to change her mind about becoming a lawyer, and she chose to pursue a career in psychology.

It was not until much later that she decided to go to law school after a prosecutor told her that her feelings about losing her case were normal and indicated she would be a good lawyer.

The judge is optimistic the mock trial experience and the visit to the courtroom will leave a lasting impression on the leadership students, help keep them out of trouble and influence career choices.

Many of the young people visiting her court don't seem to grasp how much trouble they can get into for things they don't consider "a big deal," such as possession of small amounts of marijuana or doing graffiti, and some are reduced to tears by the proceedings.

It is understandable how the sight of juvenile defendants — in their bright-orange detention uniforms, standing before the towering court bench, then being led back to their lockup by bailiffs — can serve as a big reality check for even the most calloused.

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