

Teens get close-up look at courts during mock trial

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ST. THOMAS — Nearly 100 high school students got the chance to witness a dramatic federal gun trial on Thursday, then talk to the people who made it possible.

The Charlotte Amalie, Kean and Montessori high school students participated in Kids and the Court, an educational program started three years ago by District Judge Curtis Gomez that shows students the career opportunities available to them in the justice system.

For the students' benefit, Gomez employed a little deception.

After gathering in the federal courtroom, the judge told the teenagers he thought it would be instructive for them to see a small trial that was on the morning's calendar. The judge did not reveal that the trial was staged.

For most of the students, the trial peaked when the unruly defendant — a fisherman charged with offering a coworker money to stash an assault rifle — shoved aside his attorney and charged the witness stand.

Many gasped when the fisherman, played by Deputy U.S. Marshal Bob Roberg, was tackled and handcuffed by two of his fellow marshals. Deputy Marshal David Drake simulated using a stun gun to subdue the defendant, letting the students hear its electricity crackle.

The mock trial was a first for the program.

The guilty verdict, and a subsequent 10-year prison sentence and \$100,000 fine, became a topic of controversy among the teens, who voiced their disappointment after Gomez revealed the trial had been staged for their benefit.

In a show of hands, the vast majority of students disagreed with the conviction.

Denique Jacobs, a Kean 12th grader, said the fisherman got what he deserved. Prosecuting criminals was the career that was most appealing, she said.

But her friend, 11th grader J'Nelle Blake, said she would rather be on the other side of the aisle.

In true defense attorney fashion, Blake said evidence presented at the trial was mostly irrelevant, and the fisherman should have been allowed to go free.

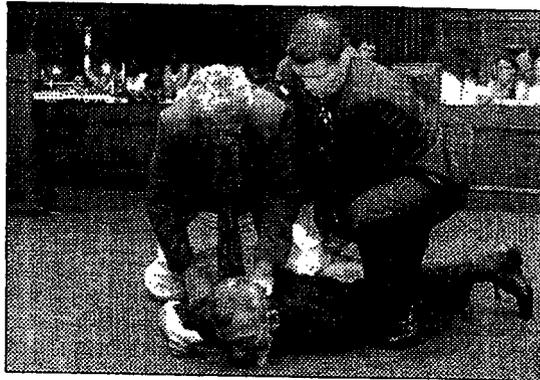
"Everybody deserves a second chance," J'Nelle said.

Montessori student Nathaniel Fuller was less certain.

"It seemed like he was guilty," the ninth grader said.

All agreed they enjoyed the stuntwork of the U.S. marshals.

The students then heard from the court's employees: the judge, prosecutors and defense attorneys, a tech support



Daily News Photo by NICK SCHNEEMAN

During a mock trial event Thursday, U.S. marshals David Drake, left, and Paul Nielsen pretend to subdue Bob Roberg, who acted as an agitated defendant.

administrator, a court reporter and federal marshals.

Court reporter Chandra Kean demonstrated the complicated functions of a stenography machine. She told the group that when she was a student at Kean, she attended a similar presentation that inspired her career choice.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Everard Potter, who prosecuted the fisherman, told the students that when he was a Kean student he was not sure he could become a lawyer. He got poor SAT scores, and teachers advised him to go into the military instead of to college.

But Potter persevered with his education. "In life, you have to find things that motivate you," he said.

Assistant Federal Public Defender Jesse Gessin, who wrote the trial's script, told the students that he frequently is asked how he can defend people he knows might be guilty.

Gessin said defense attorneys fight for their clients' constitutional rights by requiring prosecutors to meet their burden of proof. He also said defense lawyers willfully limit their knowledge of the crime.

It was hard to top the marshals, who had tools at their disposal certain to awe teenagers.

Deputy Marshal Paul Nielsen walked into court decked out in full tactical gear. The marshals showed the students an assault rifle, a shotgun, a retractable baton, pepper spray and a shield.

Gomez hopes to conduct similar sessions once a month and has sent letters to all the territory's high school principal's inviting them to the court.