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Justice for all

Students study legal system through mock trial process

By JOY BLACKBURN

Daily News Staff

ST. THOMAS — “Daniel McPherson” walked into the Ron de Lugo Federal Building on Friday morning an innocent man.

By early afternoon, one jury of his peers — fellow students from Charlotte Amalie High School and Antilles School participating in a mock trial program — found him guilty, another acquitted him and a third jury simply could not come to a verdict.

“It’s been a good experience. I like it,” said Lonnell Gardiner, a junior at Antilles. “It’s my first time to actually be in a court. I never knew how juries deliberate and so forth.”

Chief District Judge Curtis Gomez presided over the proceedings, part of the Open Doors to Federal Courts program, a national outreach initiative.

The Open Doors program is designed to bring students into local courthouses, put a human face on the judiciary and break through stereotypes and misperceptions, according to information from the federal courts. One of the long-term goals of the program is to increase participation in jury service.

Friday was the first Open Doors program in the territory. Antilles and CAHS were the two schools that responded to invitations Gomez sent out to all high schools.

At the mock trial, students played the roles of the defendant McPherson, the prosecutor and the defense attorney, along with the witnesses.

Local defense attorney Stephen Brush; Nelson Jones, the assistant U.S. attorney in charge of the criminal division; and Thurston McKelvin, federal public defender, also participated, assisting their student counterparts with their roles.

In the courtroom simulation, students participated in the voir dire jury selection process, then heard scripted testimony and perused some affidavits in the case against McPherson, a fictional high school



Daily News Photo by JOY BLACKBURN

A group of students — one of three juries in a mock trial — struggles to reach a verdict Friday during an Open Doors to Federal Courts program. This jury ultimately could not reach a unanimous decision.

student accused of possession of marijuana with intent to distribute.

As they waited for the trial to begin, prosecutor Zachary Hoffman, an Antilles student, and defense attorney Natalya Arnold, a CAHS senior, jotted down notes for their closing statements.

Arnold was chosen as defense attorney because “My teacher said I could argue very well,” she said. Hoffman, chosen in part for his acting abilities, just said he was “excited.”

After hearing the testimony and closing arguments, students divided into three juries and headed off to various rooms to deliberate.

“I learned that there’s a lot of rules you have to follow when you’re a juror,” said CAHS student Jevon Thompson as he waited for the other juries to reach their decisions. Thompson was part of the jury that found McPherson guilty.

“At first I was one of them who thought he was

innocent. But when we talked about it, then all of us came to a consensus,” he said.

Thompson said the experience piqued an interest he already had in practicing law.

After each of the juries announced its verdict, Gomez, McKelvin and Jones talked to the students about the process and about their decisions.

“It’s a very important and significant thing you do when you serve on a jury,” Gomez said. He pointed out that each student heard exactly the same trial, although each jury came to a different conclusion.

Jones told them that the key — regardless of the verdict that ultimately is rendered — is for jurors to listen attentively to the evidence and to deliberate fairly and impartially.

Then, he said, once the jury has spoken, “Justice has been done.”

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