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## Mock Trial Introduces High School Students to Legal Process

by Ananta Pancham

Nov. 18, 2006 -- A late-night party, an FBI raid and a few kilograms of marijuana were just a few elements brought before the V.I. District Court on Friday, as a large panel of high-school students determined whether to convict a fictional classmate of drug charges.

At the end of the day, the students -- broken up into three separate jury panels -- had a variety of verdicts for the imaginary Daniel McPherson. While one group found him innocent, another rendered a guilty verdict. The third could not come to a decision.

"The deliberations were difficult," said CAHS senior Chantel Williams. "I really learned what it was like to be part of a jury."

According to District Court Judge Curtis Gomez, teaching the students to appreciate the jury process was the goal of Friday's mock trial, a part of the national Open Doors to Federal Courts program. While the students deliberated, Gomez explained that when real cases are tried in the courts, judges often receive countless "jury excuses."

"We want to instill an appreciation of the court process, and show the kids that the jury functions as a real independent group with the power to determine the fate of an individual," Gomez said. "It's an extremely important job."

After the verdicts were rendered, attorney Nelson Jones, assistant U.S. attorney in charge of the criminal division, passed along a similar message to the students: "When we're in court, what we're looking for are 12 people who are going to listen to the evidence and render a fair decision. As a prosecutor, my job is to make sure justice is done. And when the jury has spoken, we know that justice has been done."

Jones got an opportunity to participate in the trial, along with local defense attorney Stephen Brusch and federal Public Defender Thurston McKelvin. They offered guidance to students taking on the roles of lead prosecuting and defense attorneys.



Local defense attorney Stephen Brusch (left) shares a joke with Antilles junior Zachary Hoffman during Friday's mock trial.

"I'm a little nervous about performing in front of the crowd," said Zachary Hoffman, a junior at Antilles, before he began the process of prosecuting the fictional defendant.

During the trial, however, Hoffman moved like a pro, cross-examining several witnesses and collaborating with Jones on various motions and stipulations. During breaks, he took notes and jotted down thoughts in preparation for closing arguments.

Likewise, Natalya Arnold, a senior at CAHS, played an aggressive defense attorney, working alongside Brusch to prove, "beyond a reasonable doubt" that the defendant was innocent.

"This was really great," she said after the first round of witnesses had been questioned. "At first I was nervous, but I'm really having fun." Both Brusch and McKelvin prepped her for the trial by offering tidbits of advice, Arnold said.

"I was told to be comfortable in front of the judge and the jury, and to speak confidently," she said. "I think that was good advice, because when I was selected to participate in the program, my business-law teacher told me that I like to argue. But I don't think I should argue with the judge."

CAHS and Antilles were the only schools that signed up to participate in the program, Gomez said.

"I was hoping for a bit more participation, but this is only the first year we're doing it," he said. "But our goal, like the other outreach initiatives we do, is to get the students in here to see what the court is like and how we work, and to give them a thorough understanding of the process. Today, they learned that being part of the jury is probably the most significant part of that process. They became judges -- judges of the facts."