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Mock Trial Provides Real-Life Courtroom Drama

Many people feel that they know how the legal system works after watching one of the myriad television shows that depict lawyers and court cases. Students at Mount Mercy Academy have the opportunity to move beyond the couch and enter the courtroom as prosecutors, defense lawyers and witnesses. Mock Trial, a long-running and well-respected national program, is an opportunity for students to actively experience the legal system in action.

Thirty schools in Western New York participated in Mock Trial this year. Students across the state of New York are given the same civil or criminal case and must prepare to present the case as the prosecuting side, as well as the defense side. Each team works with lawyers from the New York Bar Association. The cases are heard by other lawyers who serve as judges.

Each school enters the preliminary round and then the top twenty schools advance into the elimination round. Schools compete on Saturdays at the University of Buffalo Law School. Each team is awarded points based on its opening and closing statements, direct examination and cross examination. Points are totaled from the two preliminary trials and the top twenty advance into the next round. The elimination round is single elimination. Once a team loses, they are out of the competition.

Mount Mercy's team is coached by Steven McCrea. A history teacher at Mount Mercy, McCrea has been working with the team at Mount Mercy since 2006 and he also coached at Bishop Timon for two years. McCrea enjoys watching the team develop their skills and rise to the challenge of the case. He feels that it is a unique activity and likes working with the students outside the classroom setting. Although the Mock Trial team requires a time commitment and outside preparation, McCrea feels the efforts are worth the benefits.

"Mock Trial is great for teaching public speaking and self-confidence. The girls learn to think on their feet and adapt to all of the twists and turns that happen in a trial. Each case unfolds differently and they must instantly adapt to these changes. It is a great experience for the students," McCrea explained.

The team meets and practices twice a week in January and February and then competes on Saturdays. Two attorneys, Mr. Russell Ippolito and Mrs. Kristin Langdon Arcuri, Mount Mercy class of 1989 worked with the team as well to help them prepare for trial.

This year the team had a successful season, winning one and losing one in the preliminary round. The team defeated Saint Francis in the preliminary round. In the elimination round Mount Mercy defeated Saint Francis, advancing to the top ten. There they competed well with Williamsville North, a perennial power, but lost.

The team this year benefitted from the experience and expertise of four seniors who competed in Mock Trial all four years. Alison Prendergast (Buffalo), Megan Fabian (West Seneca) Molly Dedloff (Gowanda) and Laurel Bodensteiner (West Seneca), have been team members since their freshman year. Prendergast was the lead prosecuting attorney and delivered the closing argument. Fabian delivered the opening statement for the prosecution. Dedloff was the lead attorney for the defense and delivered the closing argument. In addition, the lawyers question and cross examine witnesses. Bodensteiner served as a witness for the prosecution.

Fabian felt there were definite benefits from participating. "Being on Mock Trial helped me immensely in public speaking, thinking on my feet and having confidence when speaking in front of others," Fabian said.

"I have gained public speaking and memorization skills," Dedloff remarked. "I learned to read a speech with emotion and the importance of teamwork."

"Mock trial was a great experience," Prendergast stated. "It has caused me to consider the law as a future career. I enjoyed working with the lawyers and hearing what their evaluation of my strengths and weaknesses."

Eight other young women were part of the Mock Trial team. Sophomores Grace Ippolito (Orchard Park) and Nora Galley (West Seneca) and freshman Lauren Zimmer (Hamburg) were members of the prosecution team. Ippolito was the third attorney and helped examine and cross examine witnesses. Galley and Zimmer served as prosecution witnesses. Senior Megan Miller (Buffalo), sophomores Ippolito, Shea Halpenny (Buffalo) and Emily Lewandowski (East Aurora) and freshman Kaitlyn Morris (Orchard Park) were on the defense team. Ippolito was also the third attorney for the defense. Halpenny delivered the opening statement the defense and Lewandowski, Morris and Miller were all defense witnesses.

Erin Gormley, a Mount Mercy Alumna from the class of 2006, participated in Mock Trial for four years. She is now an attorney for the Colligan Law Firm. She received her Bachelor of Science degree from Northeastern University and her J.D. from the University of Pittsburgh Law School.

Gormley believes that participating in Mock Trial helped lead her to her chosen career. "My participation in high school Mock Trial at MMA gave me a first impression of what it would be like to practice as an attorney in the local community. It was a great opportunity to try something new and decide if the legal field was something that I was interested in pursuing. Now that I have finished law school and have started practicing as an attorney in Buffalo, I am thankful that my Mock Trial experience helped me to guide my career path," Gormley commented.



Picture ID: Mount Mercy's Mock Trial Team: Attorney Russell Ippolito, Lauren Zimmer, Emily Lewandowski, Laurel Bodensteiner, Grace Ippolito, Alison Prendergast, Molly Dedloff, Megan Miller, Megan Fabian, Nora Galley, Advisor Steve McCrea

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