

Judge teaches students about courtroom etiquette

By Earlene Ward - Special to the Sierra Star

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Members of the Yosemite High School Mock Trial Team received a lesson in courtroom procedure during a recent visit by Madera County Superior Court Judge Edward Moffat. The judge spent more than two hours with the students, first listening to them practice their presentation for Mock Trial competition, and then another hour of questions and answers.

Judge Moffat was joined by Madera County District Attorney Ernie LiCalsi, who is the YHS team's attorney coach, and by Alex Acosta, a retired criminal investigator for the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office, and now a resident of Mariposa who works with the students every week as well.

Deborah Brown is the YHS coach for the team which will compete at the county level Dec. 10.

Judge Moffat is the judge for the Mock Trial competition, but he has no input in the scoring that determines the winner. "He's here to help you," Brown told her students, reminding them that he would treat them the same way he treats attorneys in the courtroom, questioning them as he deems necessary.

The judge confirmed that as he began working with the students, "I have a tendency to ask questions," he told them. He urged them to be prepared for the local competition; "the better prepared you are locally, the better prepared you are for the next level." He told the students he would be asking questions as they went along just to test them.

As the students went through the Mock Trial practice, the judge would stop them to make a point, question them or offer advice. He was constantly teaching them in an informal manner, giving them legal pointers. Once the practice ended, he, LiCalsi and Acosta spent more than an hour answering questions, giving tips and generally instructing the students.

LiCalsi advised the students as to how people act in court and he talked about the way an attorney questions witnesses and about professional appearance.

The students were asking questions, discussing the case and wondering if they judge thought the fictitious defendant was guilty or not guilty.

The discussion between the students and the professionals included rules of evidence, expert witnesses, how to effectively question a witness, cross examination, pre-trial motions, case law and how to use it, how attorneys should use notes when they are in court, court etiquette and demeanor, credibility of witnesses, opening and closing statements and elements of the crime, and attorney strategies.

Judge Moffat urged the students to become involved in the case and to "have some feeling for what you are doing; show a little passion for what you do."

Acosta commented that he is at the students' practice each week "to listen and learn from the



Madera County Superior Court Judge Edward Moffat talks to the students who are participating in the Mock Trial competition.
Courtesy of Earlene Ward

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children." He said "it's an eye-opener" to see how bright the young people are and to listen to them each week. He provides perspective from an investigator's point of view. Prior to working for the Los Angeles County DA's office, he was a deputy for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

Brown is enthusiastic and grateful for the support the students get each week from LiCalsi and Acosta and she was delighted that Judge Moffat took time from his busy schedule to drive to Oakhurst and coach the students. "This has never happened before," she told the students, "this is a real privilege to have him come and work with you."



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