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Teen Court Provides Hands-On Legal Experience

FORT WORTH, Texas – Teens from across North Texas gathered at Texas Wesleyan University School of Law on Saturday, March 1, for the second annual Teen Court Competition, where mock and real defendants with Class C misdemeanor charges were tried by their own peers.

Youth volunteers with an interest in law were prepped by Texas Wesleyan law students before presenting their cases to local judges who volunteered their time to the event. By agreeing to have their cases heard in the Teen Court Competition, defendants with Class C misdemeanor charges received a reduced sentence consisting of community service hours and jury duty. They also avoided having a mark placed on their permanent records. Of the 20 cases presented, 12 involved real defendants.

Teen Court coordinator Saleemah Jones, a prosecuting attorney with Fort Worth's municipal courts, said that by giving up a weekend day to volunteer for the event, teen court participants display a genuine interest in and commitment to their own futures.

"If they are really involved, we should be there to help them," Jones said. "Why not help them out? I think they may be getting a possible career [in law] started. Saturday is important to them, and they are giving that up."

Judge Debra Lehrmann, of the 360th District Court for Tarrant County, has been involved with Teen Court for many years, and said her children now participate as well.

"It is such an important program," Lehrmann said. "I actually helped initiate it when it was new. Then when my kids got into middle school, I wanted them involved."

Lehrmann said that the defendants can benefit from teen court as well, noting that the exposure to other teens who are working to better their communities may have a more significant impact on them than if they were to simply pay their fine and move on.

"Hopefully the kids who commit inappropriate actions are seeing something that can benefit society," Lehrmann said. "They are seeing that their actions can benefit society, and when they are judged by a jury of their peers, that may have a bigger impact."

Before heading into court, law students who participated in the event provided mentorship to the teen court volunteers, sharing tips about courtroom procedure, explaining legal terms, and answering any last-minute questions that arose.

Andrea Hunter, public interest research coordinator for the law school, said coordinators from the teen courts present at the event said they were pleased with the advice given to teens by the law students, and students have already shown interest in next year's event.

Teen Courts that participated in Saturday's event included Collin County, Wichita County, Duncanville, Metroport, Parker County, Plano, Fort Worth, Lewisville, Keller, Haltom City, Watauga, and Hurst Eules Bedford (H.E.B.).

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