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# Durango students spend weekend in court

**Teenagers play attorneys in mock trial event**

by Garrett Andrews

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Durango High School students Friday worked to put away a violent eccentric accused of a crime most heinous, and they defended the poor, misunderstood soul with equal zeal the next day.

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Photo by Photos courtesy of the Colorado Bar Association

Durango High School student Luke Brossman, left, acting as an attorney at the Colorado Bar Association State High School Mock Trial Championship on Saturday, interviews a witness on the stand while teammates Michael Wisner and Teresa Snyder prepare to back him up against the team from Colorado Academy of Denver. The teams were among 21 from across the state that qualified for the finals, which were held in Golden.



Playing both prosecutors and defense attorneys in turn, six DHS students and their sponsors took part in the state finals competition of the Colorado Bar Association Mock Trial Tournament over the weekend at the Jefferson County Combined Court in Golden. The two-day tournament was sponsored by the bar association and hosted by the 1st Judicial District.

The DHS team - Luke Brossman, Philip Crowder, Jasyn Ivery, Teresa Snyder, Michael Wisner, Melanie Taylor and James Oliger - have been embroiled in a particularly vexing assault and burglary case with a labyrinthine fact pattern since late October, when the CBA sent the case to all teams invited to the state competition.

The defendant in the case, fictional professor Henri Jones, was accused of breaking into the residence of an academic rival, striking him on the head and stealing historical documents Jones claimed were grotesque forgeries that discredited the reputation of state hero Zebulon Pike.

The case hinges on matters of forensic science - "CSI-type stuff," said a sponsor. Fingerprints, footprints, broken glass, blood and hair all were found.

In the end, the team wasn't one of the two to make the finals, but Ivery did take home an award for outstanding witness.

Twenty-one teams took part in the finals, whittled from more than 120 that competed in regionals. Lawyers and judges from around the state came to judge the students and preside over the fictitious case.

Judges and other legal professionals milled around the courthouse over the weekend, their youthful counterparts dressing the part, as well. Dennis Kaw, a commercial litigator with the Denver firm Preeo Silverman Green & Egle, said the kids, replete with coats, ties and smartly parted hair, looked "just like little lawyers."

Kaw, a regular mock trial volunteer, said mock trial students pick up not only a base level of legal knowledge, but also learn professionalism, public speaking, performance and speech and debate. Verbal skills, he said, seem to come easier to younger generations.

"When I coach kids, I tell them it's no different from arguing with their parents for the keys to the car," he said.

One of the eight Durango attorneys who volunteered with the DHS mock trial team this year is Frank Viehmann, a retired criminal defense attorney. He helped ground the students with an understanding of the rules of evidence and courtroom procedure.

"We're not trying to teach students to be apprentice lawyers. We're basically using the device of a trial to present them with the challenges of critical thinking, persuasion, public speaking and teamwork. It's about teaching them skills for life," he said.

DHS social studies teacher Elizabeth Collins said this year's team is as good as any she's coached in her four years as the adviser to the mock trial club.

"On this particular case, they've ended up as well-practiced as probably any attorney in Durango, to be honest, because (the students) only have to focus on one case," she said.

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