

# Julie McDonald Commentary: Teens Pursue Justice in Olympia Mock Trials

Julie McDonald / Chronicle Columnist | Posted: Monday, February 25, 2013 8:52 pm

I'll admit to an eerie sense of déjà vu watching a murder trial unfold over Presidents' Day weekend in the same Thurston County Superior Courtroom where 25 years ago witnesses had described the brutal rape and murder of a 14-year-old Tenino girl.

Thank goodness this time I watched a mock murder trial, especially since the defendant accused of shooting an ex-girlfriend was my son!

He was among 235 high school students from throughout the state to participate in the 4-H Know Your Government Conference, which this year focused on Pursuing Justice. The teenagers took on the roles of prosecutors, defense attorneys, witnesses, defendants, jurors and reporters, while real-life judges presided over the mock trials.

Though they didn't receive their assigned roles and cases until they arrived Saturday night, the teens were ready. Most had spent several months learning about the roles of attorneys, witnesses, and jurors and engaging in mock trials.

"I think my favorite experience was meeting and getting help from the attorneys and judges," said James "J.R." Yates, a Toledo senior who defended a client accused of bullying a girl and bashing her in the head with a brick.

Both my nephew and niece served as jurors.

"I liked participating in the trials as a juror because it prepared me for when I will get jury duty later on in my life," said Matthew Young, a Woodland High School sophomore.

"I had a lot of fun during the mock trials and it did require some critical thinking and communication skills for the entire jury to decide on a verdict for each trial," said Rose McDonald, an Olympia High School freshman. "Overall, KYG was a fun experience to meet new people and learn about our judicial system."

Organizers had two separate groups of attorneys, witnesses, and defendants try each case, so it was interesting to see jurors sometimes reached different verdicts in the same case. For example, my son was acquitted twice, but his counterpart was convicted.

While they engaged in mock trials, they learned about the criminal justice system and the courts from experts.

During Sunday's luncheon, John Pulcastro, an FBI analyst with expertise in counterterrorism, described how investigators in Spokane pieced together evidence to track down the racist who planted a homemade bomb in a black backpack along a parade route.

During the 2011 Martin Luther King Jr. Unity Day March in Spokane, Kevin Harpham had hoped to cause carnage when he clicked a remote control detonating the backpack filled with 128 large, egg-shaped fishing weights coated in rat poison.

Instead, city workers found the backpack, organizers rerouted the parade, and eventually Pulcastro and his colleagues arrested Harpham, who was sentenced to 32 years in prison.

"He was a hit with our group and taught them so much about the investigative process," said Jan Klein, 4-H adolescent leadership specialist and conference organizer.

Sunday afternoon, the kids and many of the 75 adults drove to the Capitol and toured the Legislative Building, which they usually do.

But this time they also toured the Temple of Justice, which celebrates its centennial this year. Washington Supreme Court Justice Mary E. Fairhurst gave up her afternoon to describe the differences between trial and appeals courts and explain the work of the nine state Supreme Court justices.

Saturday night's dinner speaker described herself as "Baby Justice" Sheryl Gordon McCloud, newest member of the state's highest court.

Anyone in ninth through 12th grades can participate in KYG, which teaches teens about how bills become laws, presidential politics, the media and politics, and the criminal justice system.

To learn more, contact local Washington State University Extension agent Pam Watson at (360) 740-1220 or Pamela.Watson@lewiscountywa.gov.

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