

Forum introduces students to justice career

By Kristin M. Kraemer, Herald staff writer



Kai-Huei Yau/Herald - Retired Superior Court Judge Dennis Yule answers questions and offers advice Friday to Riley Hughes, 15, of Asotin, at the Youth and Justice Forum at Columbia Basin College. About 200 high school students learned about the justice system and career opportunities from people in the field, including judges, lawyers, police and corrections officers. See story below.

PASCO -- Riley Hughes is determined to one day don a black robe and sit on the nation's high court as a Supreme Court justice.

The 15-year-old Asotin High School freshman realizes he's got a lot of work ahead to reach that goal.

So Friday, Hughes and about 200 other students from throughout Southeast Washington gathered in Pasco to learn that what they do now can affect their futures in the public safety and legal professions and the importance of creating mentorships.

Students in grades eight through 12 from across the Educational Service District 123 region applied for the seventh annual Youth and Justice Forum at Columbia Basin College's Byron Gjerde Center.

Organizers try to target minorities and impoverished kids who are underrepresented in the work force, particularly in the justice system.

Hughes -- who got up very early to make the trip from Asotin with his classmates -- wasn't shy about introducing himself to retired judge Dennis Yule of the Benton-Franklin Superior Court.

Hughes said he wants to start out as a lawyer and judge, then become a politician and ultimately seek appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court. He set his career path in his seventh-grade history class when he decided being a justice would be "kind of cool."

"It's just a really good, solid career choice," Hughes said. Friday, he hoped to get more information on the different careers, the "downsides and upsides" and tips for getting through school.

Yule gave his business card to Hughes and offered to set him up with an Asotin County judge.

Organizer Sal Mendoza Jr. said that is one reason the program has been a success -- it gives students one-on-one contact with professionals.

"Kids don't generally have this opportunity, and I think it's a great time for them to meet judges, officers and lawyers and interact with them," the Kennewick lawyer said.

The forum was also sponsored by the Washington State Minority and Justice Commission, CBC's Office of Diversity, the Washington State Bar Association Young Lawyers Division and the law schools at Gonzaga University and the University of Washington.

The event had about 70 professional volunteers, from judges, police and attorneys to corrections and probation officers and a court interpreter.

Mendoza said given the tough economic times, the ESD's money for next year has completely dried up and the program is in jeopardy of being canceled.

"There are people who have worked tirelessly to get this program developed ... and it's going to be sad when the funding has ended," he said. "It's really inspiring to see all these kids here."

Organizers will be seeking financial support, and Mendoza encouraged anyone who can help to call his office at 509-374-1554.

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