

High Court to Hear Three Cases Today at Centralia College

LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL: STATE SUPREME COURT JUSTICES ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION IN NON-PARTISAN POLITICAL PROCESS

By Amy Nile anile@chronline.com | Posted: Thursday, May 10, 2012 8:13 am



All nine justices from the Washington state Supreme Court are visiting Centralia College to discuss judicial issues and hold official court sessions.

“If we don’t have justice we’ll never have tranquility,” said Justice Steven Gonzalez. “Regardless of who you are, where you’re from or who you love, you can come to court and be treated equally.”

Gonzalez, along with Justices Mary Fairhurst and Charlie Wiggins, presided over the Lyceum at Centralia College Wednesday. Gonzalez, the newest justice on the court, encouraged attendees to vote in an educated way.

“I urge you, if you vote and don’t know who the candidates are, leave it blank,” he said.

Because the public elects Supreme Court judges in Washington state, the justices encouraged attendees to get information on the non-partisan judicial candidates at votingforjudges.org prior to marking their ballots.

“If you don’t vote in judicial elections, you’re magnifying the the voices of special interests,” Wiggins said.

The justices discussed how money can affect politics.

“Some candidates have a few people giving them money, which concerns me,” said Fairhurst. “We always have to guard against too much influence.”

The justices provided an overview of the Supreme Court and described its relationship to other court systems.

“It was interesting to hear how Washington looks at things compared to federal,” said Lacie Hamilton, a legal administrative assisting student at Centralia College. “It gives me a better idea of what’s going on.”

The justices talked about other judicial topics, including the separation of powers and funding basic education.

Concurrently, Associate Chief Justice Charles Johnson and Justice Debra Stephens led a political science class, while Chief Justice Barbara Madsen and Justice Susan Owens joined a criminal justice class. Owens later joined the Lyceum.

Meanwhile, Justices Wiggins and Stephens led an anthropology class.

“The time was completely full of student participation,” said anthropology professor Greg van Alstyne. “I think in part because of the engaging personalities of the justices. ... They just talked about problems in society and different levels of inequality and a lot of students are attuned to that.”

Van Alstyne said some students might think the system ignores them and he was pleased the justices spent time in a class that was not criminal justice or government related.

“It’s very political for them to visit. It shows they have a common touch,” van Alstyne said.

The Justices invite the public to sit in today as they hold open court sessions on three cases in the Corbet Theatre. The first session begins at 9 a.m., the second at 10 a.m., and the third at 1:30 p.m. The final two sessions will have a 20-minute question and answer session with the audience, before the justices deliberate privately.

“They’re really interesting cases and it’s a unique opportunity to see the court in action in your neighborhood,” Fairhurst told The Chronicle.

“And they get to ask questions. That only happens when we’re on the road.”

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Amy Nile: (360) 807-8235