

City circuit court, high school team to give students inside look at law



Michael Noble (left), Drug Court Commissioner with the St. Louis City Circuit Court, talks with students from the Northwest Academy of Law high school who are spring interns, in a pilot program to inspire young people to go into the field of law. (Dawn Majors/P-D)

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ST. LOUIS — Judge Philip Heagney shed his robe, rolled up his sleeves and pulled a chair up to the attorney's table, joining two high school students.

The two girls had a long list of questions and Heagney's undivided attention.

"Can a Missouri judge preside over criminal and civil cases?"

"Who decides which judge hears a case?"

"How long does a trial usually take?"

Heagney, a circuit judge, methodically answered the questions, sprinkling each answer with stories from his own time on the bench.

"If you are a criminal defendant, you face the possibility of losing your freedom," he explained. The remedies in civil cases rarely involve jail time, he said.

This opportunity to learn about the judicial system with insiders is a feature of a partnership between the St. Louis Circuit Court and the Northwest Academy of Law high school.

Ten students were selected this spring to participate in the six-week pilot program designed to teach young people about careers in law. Each week, the high school students spent several hours shadowing judges, prosecutors, sheriff's deputies and jury coordinators. They filed paperwork, attended bond reduction hearings and listened as prosecutors quizzed police about a warrant.

"They were enjoyable to have in the courtroom," said Associate Judge Michael Stelzer. "They always had good questions."

Educators and court officials said the program's success means that officials will be looking to expand next year.

"We would love to continue the relationship," said Sue Lampros, a law teacher at Northwest Academy. "Maybe next year we can have a few more students involved."

Northwest, which is a college preparatory high school in the St. Louis school system, opened four years ago.

Teachers there prepare students for college and potentially careers in law. The curriculum focuses on writing, public speaking, debate and basic knowledge of law.

Eldina Kunic, a senior from south St. Louis, said she transferred to the school because she was considering a law career.

"I thought they could help me figure out if it's something I wanted to do," Kunic said.

The internship with the court made a difference.

"I finally got to see what happens in the courthouse," she said. "I saw lawyers present a case."

Kunic says she found the justice system nothing like she had expected from watching television. Nonetheless, real-life law caught her attention.

She plans to study criminal law after she earns an undergraduate degree from Baker University in Baldwin City, Kan.

Other students participating in the internship were considering other careers. But their experience inside a courthouse gave them a better understanding of the justice system.

"For me it was a real eye opener," said senior Jeremy Burnett. "I never took into account that the law is sometimes not clear cut. When you see judges make decisions ... they can be

compassionate."

Burnett described watching a judge reduce a bond for a first-time offender who had no way to get out of jail.

"There is a human element," Burnett said.

The partnership between the school and court began about 18 months ago. Lampros brought a class for a one-day field trip, she said.

Soon after, Matt Murphy, the court's public information officer, arranged for several judges to visit the school, at 5140 Riverview Boulevard, to talk with students for the day.

Given the academy's aims, "it makes sense to me that the court should be partnering with them to give them the best experience that we can," Murphy said.

A long-term commitment now exists.

"It's a great opportunity for the kids to learn about the inner workings of the court system," Lampros said. "It's a real tribute to Matt Murphy and the judges willing to share their time with us."