

TWO MAHWAH TOWNSHIP PUBLIC SCHOOLS MOCK TRIAL TEAMS RECOGNIZED IN STATE COMPETITION

Teams perform mock trials in front of judge



The sixth-grade mock trial team before their presentation of case at Ramapo Ridge Middle School.



The fourth-grade team before their presentation of their case at Joyce Kilmer Elementary School.

A sixth-grade mock trial team from Ramapo Ridge Middle School and a fourth-grade mock trial team from Joyce Kilmer Elementary School, both in Mahwah, are among the top teams in the state which presented their trials before a judge at the New Jersey Law Center in New Brunswick on May 13.

The sixth-grade team took home the first-place win for all sixth-grade teams entered while the fourth-grade team came in second place for all fourth-grade teams entered in the Law Fair 2024 Competition for grades three to six sponsored by the New Jersey State Bar Association. The competition included 73 entries from teams from 45 schools across New Jersey. The teams submitted written submissions and the winners were invited to present their cases at the law center May 13-16.

Ramapo Ridge Middle School sixth-grade students Sally Ferguson, Marcus Gigante, Neal Jansen, Karina Kapadia, Jaedyn Teicher and Advait Vyas, with the help of advisor Kelly De Bello, won the prize for “The Case of Lacy Smith v. Nick Robin, A Bite of Forbidden Fruit: Apple Pay and Rotten Betrayal.” The sixth-grade team received honorable mention for their case two years ago. The current case concerns a young woman, Lacy Smith, who claims her ex-boyfriend, Nick Robin, used her bank account information on ApplePay without her consent to make a large purchase after their breakup.

“Our sixth-grade class connected with a local attorney, Joanna Brick, Esq., a Mahwah High School alum and former mock trial competitor, Hayden D’Elena, for assistance in the process,” De Bello said. “We are very grateful for their mentorship.”

“The Law Fair Competition provides a platform for students and teachers to submit original mock trial cases, fostering an environment that not only promotes legal awareness, but also serves as a valuable educational tool,” said Ramapo Ridge Middle School Principal Brian P. Cory. “The cases submitted must be suitable for classroom use to teach students about legal issues, aligning with the civics education requirements.”

The fourth-grade team students from Joyce Kilmer School include Daniel “Isaac” Archibald, Ellie Archibald, Asher Bell, Joseph Fogle, Marisol Hwang, Miru Kim as well as teacher/advisor Maureen Schaffner. They presented “The Case of the Concerning Catastrophe” about a painter who broke her dominant arm when she was allegedly chased by the dog who owned the garage that she was painting. Michelle Fiorito Esq., a local lawyer, also helped the fourth graders with the case and acted

as a judge when the students presented the case to parents at the school.

Both teams were invited to present their cases at the Law Center in New Brunswick before a judge. After hearing the cases, the audience then deliberated and rendered a verdict.

The competition's purpose is to promote understanding of the law and justice system and to educate students about their rights and responsibilities under the law, according to the New Jersey State Bar Foundation website. The winning cases, selected from 73 entries, dealt with theft, forgery, negligence, vandalism, copyright law, credit card fraud, and electric scooter crash. This year, more than 580 students participated.

Students and teachers in New Jersey are invited by the New Jersey State Bar Foundation to compete in this free contest. This year, the sixth grade Project Challenge students at Ramapo Ridge Middle School had the opportunity to submit their mock trial entry, and they embraced that challenge, De Bello said. "The experience helps them appreciate our judicial system while becoming better problem solvers and team players. The critical thinking involved in the competition is demanding and hones their analysis skills. At the same time, the development of new characters bolsters their creativity."

The students wrote a script, complete with attorneys' opening and closing arguments, along with direct and cross-examinations of four witnesses, De Bello said. "They must deliver this live trial in a 15-minute presentation, so careful word choice and efficiency are key. Students went through many drafts of their parts to keep within the suggested timeframe while giving a strong, clear message for the judge and jury."

The competition was a fun learning experience for the students, they said.

"I learned how to work and thrive as a team," said sixth grader Neil Jansen. "We have more positive group skills because of the contest."

Sixth grader Mason Burruano said he found the experience quite challenging. "I learned how to adapt to a character role that was very different from myself," he said, adding he also enjoyed wearing a wig for the event.

Portraying a lawyer also opened sixth grader Jaedyn Teicher's eyes to the legal profession. "I enjoyed experimenting with a new profession and experiencing what it would be like to be a lawyer."

Fourth graders also enjoyed the event. In fact, Isaac Archibald, who portrayed a witness for the plaintiff in his case, said he learned a great deal about the legal system. "I learned about plaintiffs and witnesses and attorneys and cases," he said. "I even learned every part of a good argument in court. My favorite thing was learning how to work as a team to write and act out a case with my peers."

Fourth grader Mari Hwang, who played plaintiff Jasmine Dripper, said the whole experience "taught me about what negligence is and why it helps the case." Mari said she also learned that "all our opinions matter."