

Students Receive Courtroom Education



By Shari' Wright - Special to the Informer

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Judge Alfred Irving (right) and his acting Judge Ty`Nekka Smith, of Anacostia High School, listened to testimony from one of the witnesses in the case before the court at the Youth Law Fair on Sat., March 7. **Photos by Roy Lewis**

The Annual Youth Law Fair, now in its 10th year, welcomed high school students from the District of Columbia Public Schools, organization leaders, and parents on Sat., March 7.

“I’ve seen repeats and return visits here. I’ve even seen a young man who was here a few years back come in with his brother today. So I believe we are achieving a goal which is to reach these students,” said Curtis Etherly, Vice President, Public Affairs of Coca Cola Enterprises Bottling Companies.

The fair allows area students to gain hands on experience within the court system.

“This is a unique program that touches the youth. It’s all too rare to have this type of dialogue with them,” Etherly said.

After orientation, the 150 student were given a tour of the courtrooms and holding cells by judges.

“We are really pleased for a day like this. The schools really helped advertise this year. This is our biggest turnout,” said Judge Melvin R. Wright from the District of Columbia Superior Court.

The Superior Court of the District of Columbia joined in sponsorship with the Litigation section of the D.C. Bar, and co sponsored with other sections of the D.C. Bar, including Administrative Law and Agency, Family Law, Health Law and Arts, Entertainment, Media and Sports Law, for the accumulation of the fair. Washington’s Superior Court and the D.C. Bar realized they needed an outreach program that would expose children to the law in positive ways and the concept of the youth fair was prepared 10 years ago.

“We’re giving them a general outlook of the legal system. We want to show that there are various positions here. There is something for everyone,” Wright said.



Curtis Etherly, vice president of Public Affairs for Coca Cola Enterprises, gives the agenda to students from schools in the metropolitan Washington area's 10th annual Youth Law Fair at H. Carl Moultrie Courthouse on Sat., March 7. **Photos by Roy Lewis**

The students participated in a host of activities but at the core of the event are the mock trials, where the teens are given a case, paired with actual legal workers and set up to act as the judge, jury, and lawyers. Ty'Nekka Smith, a student with the Roving Leaders Program, said "I liked how all of it worked." She was the judge in one of the mock trials and expressed her enjoyment with seeing the entire process of how cases brought to court are addressed, especially the closing arguments.

"The Roving Leaders Division provides surrogate parenting and looks to intercept and redirect negative behavior," said Benjamin Johnson of D.C. Parks and Recreation.

While the students are given the opportunity to be on the other side of the courtroom, they are further engaged with the topics of the cases and the feedback forums. The cases for the mock trials are fictional yet they are created from the actualities of teenage life—music, the Internet, college aspirations, trouble in school or home, dating, drugs, crime and violence.

This year, the case revolved around the legal ramifications of technological usage, such as YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, text and instant messages as they are linked with harassment, violence and freedom of speech. The case decided what is considered safe and acceptable in the realm of free speech.

"We want this generation to know they have a role to play, they have a voice," Etherly said. "We take part in this hoping to plant a seed."

Supporting organizations of the fair included City Year, D.C. Vote and Women Empowered Against Violence with exhibition tables, and contributing companies being Coca Cola Enterprises, BET Network and Washington Nationals Baseball that gave food and prizes to further the incentive of staying throughout the day.

"I would definitely come again. I really like seeing the back and forth between the lawyers, and then the back and forth debate between us in the jury. Definitely, I'd come again," said Anacostia High School student Tiara Chance.