

Pay It Forward, In Kind: Volunteer with the Mock Trial Program

The State Bar of Wisconsin Mock Trial Program teaches students valuable life skills and primes the next generation of lawyers for success. A legal practice amply prepares attorneys to volunteer as a mock trial lawyer-coach or judge.

BY RYAN M. BILLINGS

In March, high school students from around Wisconsin will gather in Madison for the State Bar of Wisconsin's Mock Trial Tournament. Now in its 32nd year, the Mock Trial Program teaches students how to present a case, everything from opening statements to closing arguments. Wisconsin-licensed lawyers donate their time to play the role of judges, ruling on objections and critiquing the students' performances. Volunteering with the program draws upon skills lawyers already have and makes a world of difference to the students.

Two of my brothers and I participated in the program while in high school. We were coached by a Sheboygan lawyer (Richard Binder, now retired) and our math teacher (Harlan Weber, who has passed away), assisted by attorney Binder's paralegal (Billie Jo Jentsch, who I ended up hiring 25 years later). The lessons I learned from the program still resonate with me today.

I recall vividly the impromptu demonstrations from attorney Binder, who would invent an entire cross-examination on the fly just to illustrate a point. One thing that struck me was that he would often give one piece of advice during one meeting and the exact opposite advice several meetings later. At the time, I was bemused by this apparent contradiction. Now, having practiced law for several decades, I get it – context is key. In the legal world, strategy shifts with changing circumstances and dynamics, and inflexibility in the face of an ever-evolving situation can lead to disaster.

In addition to his skillful instruction, Mr. Weber imparted life lessons. He would never accept an excuse that an assignment was

completed late because we had to deal with an unexpected task the night before it was due. His gentle response would always be the following: you should not have waited to do it until the last minute. That stuck with me, and to this day I get antsy whenever one of my briefs is not substantially completed a few days before it is due (that practice has saved me more than once). It is so hard to teach that ethic, but Mr. Weber imparted the lesson firmly but kindly. I have no doubt that I am a better lawyer and likely a better person because of my Mock Trial Program experiences.

Volunteer work as a mock trial judge draws on skills lawyers have honed through years of practice. It is one of the easiest lifts an attorney can make, and newcomers are paired with experienced judges to guide them through the process.

I encourage all who have benefitted from the Mock Trial Program or mentoring of any kind to consider paying it forward by making an in-kind trade: donate time and lawyering skills in repayment of time donated to our younger lawyer selves and as pre-payment toward developing the next generation of Wisconsin lawyers.

Visit the Mock Trial Program at www.wisbar.org/mocktrial to learn more. I am confident that all who participate will reap ample returns.

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