

Mock Trial for Scouts draws record attendance

Written by George Browning
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For the fifth consecutive year the Clark Circuit Court No. 1 hosted a staged crime scene and mock trial for area boy and girl scouts. This year's program brought the highest level of attendance ever, according to sponsoring Judge Dan Moore. It also featured a new presentation of a trained canine dog to help investigate a staged "crime" that occurred and an important reminder from a detective about crimes against children. Over 100 scouts, parents and supervisors attended this year's program.

"It was the biggest crowd we have ever had and the canine and special advice for young people were keys to the success of the evening," according to Judge Moore.

Some 60 scouts from across the county attended the information session that began in the county meeting room. There, the scouts heard from Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Michaela Gilbert and Public Defender Jeff Stonebraker about the roles of those offices after police and detectives worked on a crime scene and delivered reports to the Prosecutor's office. County Chief of Detectives Donnie Bowyer explained how a case is handed over to the detective division after it is first discovered by patrol officers. Bowyer explained the necessity of "keeping the details" of every item, trace particle of evidence and witness statement that can be discovered after a crime. He explained the reality of police work as very different from TV shows like NCIS or Law and Order.

Detective Rachael Lee of the Clark County Sheriff's Department first talked about the role of women in law enforcement, which was of particular interest to the girl scouts in attendance. She then explained her police role in investigations of crimes against children and offered the scouts several important pointers, and contact people, they should seek out if ever approached by a stranger or someone who poses a threat to them.

In a planned surprise, in the midst of the presentation by Officer Denver Leverett of the Jeffersonville Police Department about his canine companion, the dog reacted to what had been staged as an illegal substance (really oregano) in the black purse of a woman in attendance (volunteer local attorney Mary Fondrisi). The trial recessed and resumed in Judge Moore's courtroom for a trial of the accused woman and another lady who resembled her (local attorney Lisa Regar). These volunteer "defendants" had intentionally dressed in similar clothes and both carried a large black purse to confuse identification witnesses, when the dog is claimed to have "alerted."

Court trial roles were assigned and Stonebraker led the defense team with attorney Mitch Harlan. Scout defenders were selected who questioned the witnesses beginning with Officer Leverett.

Gilbert led a contingent of scout prosecutors who put on the state case, seeking to convict at least one of the ladies with the purses for illegal possession of marijuana. The trial was presented to a scout jury and courtroom roles for Court Reporter, Bailiffs and the Judge were assigned to scouts. Moore sat with scout judge, Aliya Rubush, assuming the bench and presiding over the trial as Judge of the court.

Area attorneys Bob Bottorff and Greg Reger also volunteered time to be witnesses in the trial. Bottorff played the role of spouse to one of the defendants and Greg (in the skit and in real life) took the role of husband to Lisa Reger, the defendant.

Bottorff wore bib overalls to portray a wheat farmer in the countryside who assured the jury his wife would never possess illegal drugs like marijuana while Greg Reger portrayed his home situation as difficult since his (defendant) wife was an extremely strong household manager who

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was furious that she was charged with the crime. The Regers role-play explained they merely stopped in to the courthouse to watch the scout program after attending church.

In the end of the trial Bowyer took the stand to explain how alleged drugs are field-tested and Detective Lee testified last, explaining her identification of Maria Franklin (Fondrisi) as the owner of the purse where the substance was found. The jury retired and returned verdicts of "not guilty" as to both defendants Fondrisi and Regar. "Judge" Rubush declared the trial concluded and pizza and soft drinks were provided to all guests.

Judge Moore gave thanks to all volunteers for both the information session and the mock trial acting roles. He answered questions from the audience while the jury deliberated.

"Law Day is May 1 of every year and these police officers and attorneys demonstrate what is the best about our American legal system, namely training younger citizens to become the future leaders of tomorrow," he stated.

Moore also expressed particular gratitude to Stonebraker and Gilbert for volunteering time to train the young scout questioners as to legal techniques. Stonebraker stated "who knows? We might have met some future lawyers tonight."

Judge Moore also pointed out the significance of having a first-ever girl scout preside as Judge in this annual event.

"This year's group was about an even mix of boy and girl scouts. The work of the justice system is ever-changing and Ms. Rubush, the lady scout Judge presiding tonight was very impressive," he said.

Circuit Court No. 1 offers programs of this type, and informational visits off premises, under its Riding the Circuit program. To schedule such an event, call 812-285-6256 to speak with Ms. Fuller.