

American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division
The Affiliate

“Junior Judges”: ABA YLD Public Service Project Stands the Test of Time

By Ernestina R. Cruz

The ABA YLD is known for many things, but, most importantly, for its continued focus on public service and outreach. In the fall of 2002, the ABA YLD launched “Junior Judges: Helping Kids Make Smart Choices” as its public service project for the year. The award-winning program was developed by the Texas Young Lawyers Association and received numerous awards from various organizations, including the American Bar Endowment. Through the program, elementary students in the third through fifth grades are taught how to make smart choices regarding teasing, destroying property, stealing, bullying, drugs and alcohol, and various other issues. Students are presented with a dilemma in a video vignette addressing each topic. In addition to the video, a 20-page curriculum helps guide volunteers in their preparation for facilitating a discussion in the classroom setting.

The presenter, whether a teacher, judge, or attorney, leads a discussion on the seven topics and helps students recognize the consequences of bad behavior. The students are encouraged to provide feedback regarding how they would deal with the specific situation. They are also asked to discuss the possible consequences they might face at home, school, and through the legal system if they made a choice similar to that reflected in the video.

Almost seven years after the ABA YLD launched Junior Judges, the YLD of the State Bar of New Mexico continues presenting this program throughout the state. Martha Chicoski, YLD Chair for the State Bar of New Mexico, has coordinated Junior Judges presentations in schools throughout Albuquerque over the past four years. Each year, local attorneys and judges volunteer to present the program in approximately fifty to seventy-five classrooms. Year after year, the same individuals return to participate in the program. Aside from YLD volunteers, local judges volunteer an afternoon to visit with students. The students and teachers alike are excited to have a “real” judge talk to them about the consequences that can arise from poor decision making.

Although class sizes vary, the New Mexico YLD has facilitated discussions with at least 2,000 students throughout the city. The feedback from teachers and volunteers over the past four years has been uniformly positive.

“The teachers appreciate our efforts in reaching out to the students,” said Chicoski. “The volunteers enjoy being able to go into the classrooms to talk with the students about these important subjects.” One of the most rewarding parts of the program for Chicoski has been having the opportunity to have a positive influence on young children’s lives.

This past summer the New Mexico YLD launched a Junior Judges presentation in conjunction with the State Bar of New Mexico’s Annual Convention, which was held near Santa Fe, the site of the ABA/YLD’s 2010 Fall Conference. Attorney volunteers visited with students participating in the city of Santa Fe’s Summer Youth Program. Well over 200 students attended the program at five different sites throughout Santa Fe. Rick Anaya, the city’s Director for Summer Youth Programs, noted that the presentations were topical because each year issues arise regarding bullying and teasing. The day-long project was well-received by the students and was featured on the front page of the local newspaper, the *Santa Fe New Mexican*.

The New Mexico YLD plans to continue presenting the program statewide and intends to expand the program to additional school districts in New Mexico. As one of the New Mexico YLD’s most successful community service projects, it is a testament to the impact ABA YLD projects can have at the local level.

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