

Law Related Education

The newsletter of the Illinois State Bar Association's Committee on Law Related Education

Mock Trial Special Edition

COVID-19 Pandemic = Cancellation of ISBA High School Mock Trial Invitational: How Students Turned Disappointment Into Life Lessons

BY KATY KARAYANNIS

As many of you know, in March 2020, the ISBA had to make the difficult decision to cancel the ISBA High School Mock Trial Invitational due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was such a hard decision to

make. We know that the students, coaches, friends, and families that attend this event each year work diligently over several months to prepare for the Invitational. To

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The Value of Working Toward 'Cohesion'

BY JOYCE YANG

As someone who has spent the better half of her life participating in independent activities, I have grown accustomed to working alone. The idea of collaborating with others as part of a team was completely

foreign to me, so joining mock trial contrasted vividly with everything I was familiar with. I was surprised when I realized that mock was so much more than

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all of you: we appreciate your hard work, dedication, and enthusiasm. We also appreciate the many volunteers who take time to help with the Invitational each year and the University of Illinois' College of Law for providing us with a space to hold our event. We hope to see everyone next year for the 2021 Invitational.

We have always known that this program is important to the students who participate each year and provides a great learning experience in many ways, but this year, we decided to invite students and teams to tell us about what mock trial

means to them in their own words. We have gathered these writings together in a Special Edition of the ISBA's Law-Related Education Committee's newsletter devoted to Mock Trial. We thank the students and teams who submitted their thoughts and insights and we hope that our readers enjoy and are inspired by them as much as we were!

Best wishes,

ISBA's Standing Committee on Law-Related Education for the Public and
Katy Karayannis, Mock Trial Coordinator ■

The Value of Working Toward 'Cohesion'

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just a team—it was a family. Throughout Empire season, I got to witness firsthand the bonds, memories, and inside jokes that we created. Though the team was much smaller and the workload was heavier than that of State season, the many hours we spent on case prep seemed to breeze by. I was perfectly happy just to focus on my own material without worrying much about that of my teammates. This was fine at the time; our team was small enough that communicating and integrating various concepts of our content seemed fairly simple. In retrospect, I most definitely took that for granted.

The transition into State season felt jarring in comparison—all of a sudden, I became a captain, and our team doubled in size. I felt unprepared, underqualified, and undeserving of the responsibility that I'd been handed. I did my best to help my teammates whenever I could, but it soon became evident that something just wasn't clicking. After months of scouring our case packets for some tiny detail we might have missed, updating our content, then going

to tournaments and repeating the whole process over again, we realized what certain teams had that we lacked: cohesion. It took a while for us to understand but competing against other schools was a real eye opener. We saw how seamlessly the best teams in the state possessed a certain continuity in their content, from things as broad as case theory and themes to small idiosyncrasies like hand gestures and diction. To us, this was a game changer. We poured all our effort towards achieving what other teams had been doing since the beginning, a feat much more difficult than I had previously anticipated. The process involved a lot of discussion amongst us, and a lot of reviewing of our material for inconsistencies and outliers. It was during that time that I began to truly comprehend the value of communication and the true difference that cohesion creates.

I was heartbroken when State was cancelled due to COVID-19, more so for my now-graduated senior friends than for myself. Throughout the season, they have been nothing but understanding

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and supportive, and they taught me to be a better ‘mocker.’ Although the team will be undeniably different without them, I still look forward to my next two years as a part of this incredible organization. It’s been proven to me time and time again that great things are accomplished together, not separately, and I’ll always cherish the

time I have spent with my teammates, with whom I’ve learned how to communicate and cooperate. Heading into the next school year, I have no doubt that the lessons I learned through mock trial will be indispensable, both in mock courtrooms and in the real world.■

Why I Love Mock Trial

BY JOHN RUSSELL

I love mock trial because it gave me exposure in a field that I hope to pursue. I always wanted to attend law school, pass the bar exam, and have the chance to step foot inside a courthouse, but never before have I had the experience of being an attorney before joining mock trial. I feel mock trial has helped me with my public speaking, creative writing, and my decision-making skills. It has helped me pay closer attention to detail and learn how to be in the moment.

In my opinion, mock trial was much like playing a sport only without the physical exertion. The attorneys were like the offensive linemen protecting the quarterback who was the witness. There is an offense (plaintiff) and defense where each side must know their roles better than anyone else to have a chance at success. If one person does not prepare enough for their role, regardless of its perceived size, then the whole team would suffer as a result. Mock trial has given me the chance to learn how to work together on a team with others. Sadly, I never realized how important this skill is until I joined the Mock trial team.

Throughout the season, my team especially has learned accountability, discipline, and the need to be prepared at any moment for something to not go as planned. Despite the many hours of preparation after school and at home, it was fun and worth it to present your piece and own your role on the weekends! Mock trial encompasses elements from speech, debate, and acting which was very appealing to a student like me who was interested in all of

those activities throughout high school. The experience I had working hard, having fun with my teammates, practicing courtroom etiquette, meeting real life judges and attorneys, learning the law from my coaches, and taking a law exam were moments I will never forget! Anyone can benefit from joining mock trial. They will grow in their role and grow as a person throughout their time learning the case from November to March.

John Russell, Team Captain
Homewood-Flossmoor High School
Class of 2020■

New Team on the Block

BY SHIKHA BARLA, ELLEN HOU, EMILY YU, MEAGAN SLUSHER, RAFA DAVIS, & CONNOR MORGAN

What started off as just an idea for a group of friends, all juniors in high school, wanting an activity to do together, the Dunlap High School mock trial team emerged from nothing to an accomplished and dedicated team in just one short year. Stepping into the first ever mock trial meeting hosted at Dunlap, our only knowledge of law was from *Legally Blonde*. Now, our team stands out as the underdogs as we placed 14th in our regional competition of 2020. Throughout this year we took a crash course on what it means to be a part of the mock trial competition and the various lessons and experiences associated with it.

We began a mock trial team with little to no understanding as to how a courtroom worked. The basics included learning the process and rules of both regular court and mock trial. These had seemed simple enough, but preparing the actual case proved to be much more difficult than anticipated. It being our first year, we were unfamiliar with all aspects, realizing that timing was also soon an issue. Not only did we gather knowledge about the courtroom or trials but also we have learned important lessons from the entire process. We now understand the importance of time management: that the case must be started early in the process seeing that many revisions and multiple practices are necessary. Practical understandings such as informing ourselves about the rules, although this seems obvious, is another aspect we quickly realized was essential. Beyond these procedural matters, we had to consider more personal improved skills. The law club process taught many of us the importance of patience and drive.

The amount of work needed to complete the tasks was overwhelming at first, yet proved to be necessary as we quickly adapted to it. At our first competition, we could emphasize the amount of confidence and independence we felt being able to present

the case we had been working on for months. In that moment, the hard work and time consumed made sense and encouraged us to work even harder. We had grown to love the process and learned the many great aspects of being part of the team. Besides personal understandings came growth as a team. We quickly became a close team and understood the importance of collaborative thinking and dynamics. Competitions only increased our love for the process and for each other. Overall, the mock trial process has given each of us more understanding for court processes, increased individual development, and growth as an overall team.

Additionally, we enjoyed competing in mock trial competitions. The pressure of thinking on our feet and the excitement during competition provided for an enjoyable experience. We loved that each trial was always different from the prior one, and it gave us the thrill of what laid ahead of us in the courtroom. We also enjoyed competing as a team while we became a close team over the course of the season. We encourage others to participate in mock trial because it develops independence and public speaking skills. Furthermore, it provides an enjoyable way to learn about our legal system. We encourage others to participate through joining their school's law club or starting their own as we did this past year.

The 2020 Mock Trial case provided knowledge of litigation, lifelong lessons, and fondness for the court experience as a whole. As a group, we fostered our fondness for the case through its connectivity, relativity, and believability to our own lives as teenagers. In the 2020 Mock Trial scenario, two teenagers had been driving in snowy conditions under the influence of alcohol, a situation that is not out of the realm of possibility for the high school student. As students of Dunlap who frequent the often-tarnished roads of Illinois, we saw it plausible that a teenager could lose control of their vehicle under

certain icy conditions. Being administered a case by the ISBA that was both believable and credible made developing arguments for both a plaintiff and defense a more facilitated manner as evidence was properly laid out for both sides. A whimsical piece of the case that we found amusing was that there were often "holes" present through other affidavits that would lead the attorneys to have to piece together a cohesive claim to present to the judge come Regionals and other Mock Trial Invitationals. Specifically, a favorite point of the year's case was the struggle with pronouns for witnesses as it often thwarted and became detrimental in examinations and witness testimony when our rehearsed team would refer to a female Dakota Young as male due to the other team's gender constraints amongst their team (i.e. certain amount of males and females on a team denotes that one must have gender fluid pronouns that can apply to male and female if the situation arises).

Legally speaking, immense knowledge was gained due to our coach involvement by Mrs. Vogel, Mrs. Kateah McMasters, and Mr. Jeff Green. Although it was her first year, Mrs. Vogel rose to the occasion and provided us with connection to Mrs. Kateah McMasters and Mr. Jeff Green, our attorney coaches throughout the 2019-2020 Mock Trial season. Many of us had little to no knowledge of litigative procedure, so Mrs. McMasters taught us the basics. Unfortunately, an occupation change meant she had to move to Springfield, but fortunately, Mr. Green was able to step up and become the main attorney coach. He artfully discussed and taught us eager neophytes about the importance of an effective opening, direct and cross examination, and closing statement that would relay our "narrative" to the judge and jury. Through his resources and the generous provision of his well-equipped office for practice, we were able to develop an effective

case for the plaintiff and defense. Outside of law, we learned many sayings and short aphorisms that can carry us throughout the rest of our lives as young adults and into our future prospective careers. Jeff drilled us in certain phrases such as “damned if you do and damned if you don’t”, “lay it out like a roadmap”, “don’t make your conclusion obvious”, etc. Mr. Green and Mrs. Vogel taught us that through hard work, we could accomplish anything. As a first year team, we faced difficult competition and performed at a high level. This is a testament to the learning and work that we have put into our case.

Not only did we receive direction from our coaches, but also from our fellow teammates. Because this was a new experience for us all, guidance from anyone and everyone was welcomed and appreciated. As a team, this experience was not only about learning the mock trial process but having fun while we did it. And yes, we are well aware that this observation sounds corny at best, but by truly keeping this experience a positive and fun environment for all, we were able to obtain the success that we had as a first-year team. A couple of days after the case information was released, our team collectively decided that each day after school, our team would go to a designated practice area and dissect the case, going page by page, focusing on each and every word. Although these practice sessions started out as a little less than serious, with teammates goofing off and the occasional who-can-catch-the-Cheez-It-in-their-mouth-first game, we could always count on each other to bring us back on track and focus on Riley and Dakota’s teenage issues. The small practice sessions gradually became more productive, and the fresh perspective that each person brought to the table became our team’s greatest strength.

Being able to observe how each individual interpreted an affidavit or evidence exhibit allowed us to thrive in creating a central theme for each side of the case and in formulating logical theories for the occasional hole in a character’s story. Another strength that we learned about each other early on in the season was our dependability. Although we were a mere

eight students who were tasked with fulfilling multiple witness and attorney roles for both the defense and plaintiff sides, not once did a teammate not rise to the challenge. In fact, with a simple request, each teammate would be more than willing to create a new cross examination or even an opening statement. As our team consisted of all upperclassmen, each person also already had their own commitments, whether it be sports, other clubs/organizations, or even an outside job. However, the level of dedication that each teammate displayed to the team continually surprised our coaches and even ourselves throughout the season. To say that learning the entire mock trial process was near impossible, especially with our team’s lack of prior knowledge (except the occasional phrase we learned from Judge Judy growing up), would be an understatement. Yet, our team remained resilient and rose to the occasion, becoming well-versed in objections and the countless exceptions to the hearsay rule. Doing this allowed us to become “underdogs” and have schools with experienced teams remember our name for future seasons. Our team was able to grow more than one could possibly imagine as a result of this experience, and we hope to continue this growth and learn from each other in our future mock trial challenges.

As a first year team, we can all confidently say that this was a learning experience for all of us, students and coaches alike. There were definitely numerous ups and downs throughout the season, yet through it all we were able to learn a variety of new skills and abilities that will stick with us for a lifetime. We would like to thank ISBA for giving us the opportunity to learn about mock trial and gain all of these new skills through not only an educational and challenging, but also hands-on and fun case. Additionally, we would especially like to thank our coaches, Mrs. Vogel and Mr. Green, for giving up their time to commit to this team and teach us all the skills we’ve acquired this season. Not only will these experiences prove useful for our senior year season but we will be passing all of our knowledge and experiences on to the younger law club members so that they will have the same great opportunities that we did. ■