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Law students, attorneys assist in middle school mock trials

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The Joker was suing Batman for assault and battery, seeking \$2 million for his injuries. Batman said he acted in order to thwart a pipe bomb explosion.

It's obviously not a real case, but it was enough to engage Los Angeles middle schoolers in a mock trial this year that was prepared and acted out with the help of Loyola Law School students and area attorneys.

The program, now approaching its ninth year, is a collaboration between nonprofit Team Prime Time and Loyola to get the gears moving in students' minds about the law.

Its origins started with retired Los Angeles County Superior Court judge and current ADR Services Inc. mediator Patricia Collins. She sat on Prime Time's board and wanted to add something academic in terms of after school programs.

Loyola Law School professor Laurie Levenson suggested teaming up with the school, which is the only law school in the area that has a community service requirement.

"I don't think you can separate the program's success from Judge Collins' efforts," said Peter Straus, founder and executive director of Team Prime Time.

Law students and attorneys



Sarah Abel/Team Prime Time

Mediator Patricia Collins, center, gives an award to Green Broillet & Wheeler LLP attorneys Molly McKibben, left, and Christian Nickerson, right, because the firm donated the most pro bono hours this year to a mock trial program for middle schoolers

come in to teach different aspects of the civil justice system to students at Ralph Waldo Emerson Community Charter School and Palms Middle School. At the end of the 10-week session the children square off in a mock trial.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Suzanne Segal, a graduate of Emerson, has presided in the trial over the past couple of years.

"We got a terrific response from the legal community," said Collins. "I try really hard to reach out so we get a diverse group of lawyers."

Collins said many of the law students have come back as lawyers and continued to work with the program. And the attorneys

who participate are not just associates but partners too.

Tim Wheeler and Bruce Broillet, partners at Santa Monica plaintiffs' firm Greene, Broillet & Wheeler LLP, have volunteered their time teaching students. The firm received an award from Team Prime Time for donating six hours of participating firms.

"Gary Dordick came in and said, 'I don't know how to talk to middle schoolers,' but he was great," recalled Collins.

The students are a mix of racial and economic backgrounds who have been extremely receptive to learning about the law, according to Collins.

"They are really into it. They really want to show off what they've learned, and they are really responsive to constructive criticism," said Molly McKibben, a Greene, Broillet & Wheeler attorney who showed students how to directly examine a witness. Students also learned about closing arguments and parts of the evidence code.

"I was impressed, given the fact they had iPads in front of them, that they were writing notes down," said McKibben, whose team won.

Straus said he encourages law students to engage with the middle schoolers. "I do orientation with the law students, and I tell them, 'They will surprise you. They will seem disinterested and preoccupied, but you must be prepared because they will rise above and beyond your expectations. They just need an opportunity,'" said Straus.

Collins said the volunteers do a fabulous job of getting the children's attention. "They are shocked at how smart these kids are," she said.

It is hard mentoring students without a program in place, but the mock trial provides a place for learning, according to Straus.

"This gives lawyers one hour a week to come in and mentor kids to do exactly what they do," said Straus. "This is what makes the connection really meaningful."