

Mock Trial Inspires Future Careers

by **ALLAN APPEL** | May 8, 2018 3:56 pm

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Seven years ago, then-9-year-old Flor Jimenez and her brother watched their father Luis get treated with what they thought was

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The two judges share a moment of levity after jurors left the chamber to deliberate

unnecessary roughness by a New Haven police officer. She says her father's subsequent complaint has never been resolved.

Justice came more swiftly Tuesday when Flor, now 16 and a tenth-grader at Metropolitan Business Academy, presided over a different case as a judge.

She was, of course, a mock judge in a mock yet moving criminal trial that unfolded in U.S. District Court at 141 Church St. as part of the annual [Law Day](#) celebration.

Flor is part of social studies teacher Nataliya Braginsky's tenth-grade law class. She and her peers prepared for weeks with local attorneys who have visited the school.

They appeared on Tuesday as attorneys, witnesses,

jurors, and courtroom officials, along side their real counterparts in the courtroom of U.S. Magistrate Judge Sarah Merriam.

They were trying a fictional criminal case of one Chris Archer, president of a fraternity. Archer was present during a night of initiation and possible hazing, when a frat aspirant fell to her death off the roof at fictional Columbus University.



Student jurors.

Ana Laura Velez served as chief prosecuting attorney, Aida DeLeon as chief defense attorney. Judge Flor instructed the jurors on the presumption of innocence, the meaning of “beyond a reasonable doubt” and the differences between murder and involuntary manslaughter.



Student prosecutor Velez makes her closing argument.

Much of the hour-plus presentation was material that was scripted in advance in Braginsky’s classroom as kids tried out for the various roles. This was the third mock trial they’ve done as part of the curriculum, but the first taking place in an actual court.

In court, stretches of cross examination and “re-direct” were spontaneous and required the kids to listen and to think on their feet.

“Cross examination is an adventure,” Judge Merriam said. She complimented the student attorneys on their listening skills and

some of the witnesses on how well they stuck to their stories.

She complimented student defense attorney DeLeon as well: “One of the best closings I’ve heard in years. You started out by saying your client is not guilty, and you remarked, ‘One life is lost and another is on the line.’”

That apparently had an effect on the student jurors, because when they emerged, Chris Archer had escaped most of the grievous charges. Real-life Attorney Jonathan Einhorn, who had accompanied the jurors into their sequestered adjoining room to debate, was also impressed by their deliberations.

Two juries considered the case. When the foreman and forewoman stood to announce a verdict, there was electricity in the chamber, as if a real trial was concluding. Both juries ruled Chris Archer, played by tenth-grader Enyce Culbreath, not guilty on both first and second-degree murder charges.

On involuntary manslaughter, the third charge, both juries declared themselves hung. Finally, on violation of federal anti-hazing laws, one jury found Archer guilty and another not guilty.

Judge Merriam instructed the kids that the similarity of the conclusions drawn by two groups of people, not communicating with each other, suggested one of the glories of the jury system.

She predicted that when these kids receive their first summonses to appear as potential jurors, their eyes will not roll. They will instead see participation on a jury less as a service and more as an “opportunity” to learn and be part of what she called the miracle of democracy.



Real Attorney Einhorn and teacher Braginsky.



Proud father Luis Jimenez with his daughter and Judge Merriam.

Jimenez’s father Luis — one of many of the parents in the audience — beamed with pride.

Not long after the incident with the police officer, Flor had also, with her father, testified in support of [New Haven’s immigrant-friendly municipal ID card](#).

At that occasion, someone asked her if one day she might be an attorney or a judge. Now here she was, in a manner.

A possible career in the law may be in the

cards, Flor said.



Defense attorneys Cotten and Dillard.

chamber, both Dameon Dillard and Emoni Cotten said they want to grow up to become not only lawyers, but defense lawyers in particular, not prosecutors.

“At home when my mom gets angry at me, I wish I had a defense attorney,” explained Emoni.

As they waited for the verdict, the two considered forming a law firm together — once they finish law school, of course. Its name?

To be determined— “as long as my name come first,” Dillard added.

After congratulations all around, jurors, attorneys, judges, court officers, and parents all broke out the sandwiches to have lunch together.

There was no objection.