

COURTROOM DRAMA: Students learn to look at both sides

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Acting as attorneys Stillwater Christian students Darren Kauffman, sitting, and Jake Hayden, discuss an objection with the judge as Zac Hodgskiss questions Jacina DeZell on the witness stand during a mock trial. (Aaric Bryan/Daily InterLake)



Stillwater Christian's Jacina DeZell is questioned by Zac Hodgskiss on the witness stand during a mock trial at Kalispell City Hall on Friday, Jan. 15, 2016. (Aaric Bryan/Daily InterLake)

The Kalispell City Council room was turned into a courtroom Jan. 15 for Stillwater Christian School 10th-graders to act out mock trials.

The mock trials wrapped up a two-week seminar for the junior class that studied a fictional civil court case.

Each high school grade level participated in its own seminars taught by different teachers. Freshmen studied the Middle Ages and “Beowulf,” sophomores studied creation versus evolution and seniors studied what it means to be a Christian in careers and workplace reading “Timothy Keller’s Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God’s Work.”

During the mock trial, juniors served as plaintiff, defendant or witness in deciding the fate of a will involving a woman’s final plans for her pet, its caretaker and her estranged children. In past years, students have also argued criminal trials.

“Students learn about the trial process. Very few are exposed to trials,” rhetoric teacher Micah Tinkham said. “They get to practice making these kinds of arguments.”

The purpose of the mock trial was not so much about the outcome as it was an exercise in rhetoric skills, according to juniors Miranda Lind and Zac Hodgskiss.

“It’s helped us find another way to become comfortable with the idea of rhetoric,” Lind said. “I don’t think this exact mock trial seminar was just meant for us to understand the concept of mock trials, but to be able to grow as students and to speak really well.”

Hodgskiss added that the mock trial seminar has been helpful in making interpretations.

Understanding both sides of an argument is a central component of the seminar.

“Being able to see both sides of an argument, not just your own side,” Lind said.

Looking at both sides of the coin is important in any situation, including religion, Lind noted.

“In a religious versus scientific world, it’s really important for Christians to be able to defend our faith and it’s impossible to defend our faith if we can’t even acknowledge other people’s evidence,” Lind said. “So being able to see both sides will help us figure out a way.”

Lind recalled participating in the creation-versus-evolution sophomore seminar as “one of the most incredible opportunities” she’s had at Stillwater — “to be able to see a completely different perspective.”

Before splitting up into plaintiff and defense sides, students learned about all the roles involved in the trial.

“We spent a couple of days getting to know the case, getting to know each role and being able to see all perspectives of the case. Once we broke up into teams we would try and get into the mindset of our opponent,” Lind said. “And we would try and figure out our best defense.”

Students are graded on a pass-fail system and receive credit, but that is not the primary motivation for the seminars, Tinkham said.

“The idea is to get them engaged in whatever project they are doing,” Tinkham said.