

Teaching civility through civics



To help dispel misguided notions about the judiciary and to create stronger connections between communities and courts, many judges are developing and leading civic education programs that bring students into courthouses to observe proceedings, meet with judges and attorneys, and learn how the judicial system works.

One such program, developed by Judge Robin L. Rosenberg (chair of *Judicature's* editorial advisory board) and Judge Beth Bloom, both of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Florida, adds another learning goal to the traditional civic education course: civility.

In its first iteration, the program Civil Discourse and Difficult Decisions (CD3) invited high school students to the federal courthouse in South Florida to learn about the court system and engage in discussions about court cases facilitated by real judges and attorneys. (Read more about this event in *Judicature* Vol. 106 No. 1 at judicature.duke.edu.) The program has since been adopted as a national initiative of the federal courts, and the curriculum is now freely available in the educational resources section of the uscourts.gov website. The curricu-

lum requires no advance preparation and is designed to engage students in a variety of roles that build civil discourse and decision-making skills. In fall 2023, the program was offered to law students for the first time as part of a professional skills development program at Duke Law School.

In a Q&A with *Judicature International*, Judges Rosenberg and Bloom explained the program's theoretical framework and offered suggestions for judges who may want to develop similar programs in courtrooms around the world.

"We developed the *Civil Discourse and Difficult Decisions* program with its ease of adaptability in mind," they wrote. "We readily recognize that each city, country, and region may have rules and customs that may dictate the program's structure and content."

The program is based on a particular interactive teaching method that can be adjusted to different court cases and underlying facts that resonate with young people. Students are invited to collaborate in groups as both jurors and attorneys. Through this method, the judges said, "no one can hide nor is anyone made to feel uncomfort-

able." Unlike conventional mock trials, the moderated discourse encourages empathy with the real-life experience of a trial. For example, at the Duke Law program, first-year law school students said they were surprised at how hard it was to condense their arguments as attorneys and to find unanimity as jurors.

Judges Rosenberg and Bloom offer five tips for those interested in adapting the program for use in their own courts and classrooms:

- Download the *Civil Discourse and Difficult Decisions* program materials from uscourts.gov and determine which portions will work best for your location or country's laws and customs;
- Recruit participants (judges, attorneys, teachers, students);
- Determine venue for program (school, courtroom, virtual);
- Be creative and flexible in the program's implementation; and
- Remember: If you touch even one person's life for the better through the program, it will be a success!

– ERIC SURBER is communications manager at the Bolch Judicial Institute at Duke Law School.

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