

## Candid Conversations Connect Judges to Communities

**U.S. MAGISTRATE JUDGE ZIA M. FARUQUI'S BRIGHT NEON NIKE SNEAKERS** and colorful bow ties consistently catch the attention of the countless students he meets with, but it's the open dialogue he fosters that broadens their perspectives about the legal system and the role of the judiciary.

"Young people, in particular, have real concerns about the judiciary, particularly the criminal justice system," said Faruqui (at center in photo at right), who sits on the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. "Judges, attorneys, and non-attorney court professionals have the opportunity and, I believe, the responsibility to address the issues they raise. Without information, the students are susceptible to misinformation and stereotypes."

Through Candid Conversations, a national civics education program developed by the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, federal judges across the country engage with students of all backgrounds in classrooms and courtrooms to deepen their understanding of the court system and teach them valuable legal and life skills. The program is suitable for state and federal court judges to use with middle school, high school, community college, university, and law school student audiences.

It also can be offered in adult education programs and presentations to community groups. Audiences set the discussion level with the questions they ask of the judges. No prepara-

tion is required for the visiting judges or the audience members (though an activity guide posted on the federal courts' website is available should teachers wish to prepare students in advance of a judge's visit).



The Candid Conversations framework allows audience members to initiate discussion by sharing their questions, opinions, and perspectives on current issues. Their thought-provoking explorations set the stage for conversations with judges that go far beyond platitudes or soundbites. Judges take a collaborative approach in their responses, asking students for their opinions and feelings as they work through complex issues together.

Faruqui embraces the candid aspect of the conversation as an opportunity to meet students where they are. He builds rapport with students by speaking about challenges he has faced and

how they shaped him and drew him into the law as a career. He talks about coping with his father's sudden death while he was in high school, and how his mother, a community college graduate, bravely raised him on her own while twice battling cancer.

"There was a time when I could not have imagined sharing such personal stories about myself with rooms of people I don't know," Faruqui said. "But I find being open and honest about my upbringing and eventual path to the bench humanizes the judiciary and breaks through students' preconceived notions of who can join our team, be it as a judge, probation officer, IT specialist, accountant, etc.

There is no one set path."

One format of Candid Conversations uses a three-minute discussion-starter video, "Students Sound Off About the Bill of Rights," to set the stage for students' questions and comments. Links to the video, along with the Candid Conversations activity guide and other resources from the U.S. Courts educational resources website, are available with this article at [judicature.duke.edu](http://judicature.duke.edu) or [uscourts.gov](http://uscourts.gov).

– **REBECCA FANNING** is the federal courts' national educational outreach manager at the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts. She develops national initiatives, including Candid

Conversations, for students, teachers, and adults. To request a school visit for a virtual or in-person Candid Conversations program from a nearby federal courthouse, email [rebecca\\_fanning@ao.courts.gov](mailto:rebecca_fanning@ao.courts.gov).

» Other civics programs from the U.S. Courts include Civil Discourse and Difficult Decisions, The Bill of Rights in Your Life, and realistic courtroom simulations featuring jury deliberations on contemporary topics ranging from cyberbullying and school protests to cellphone bans and backpack searches. Resources are available for immediate classroom and courtroom use at [uscourts.gov](http://uscourts.gov).