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Bar group schools students on civics

Federal Bar chapter president in Chicago leads outreach in U.S.

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Spending time in the federal courthouse can give students a lesson in more than just the rules of evidence or the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines, according to federal prosecutor Sheri H. Mecklenburg.

Students see the human side of the justice system, she said, when they watch court proceedings and meet with members of the legal profession.

"It's a way for them to view the system and talk to judges in a way that generates more confidence and lets them see that people really care," said Mecklenburg, the president of the Federal Bar Association's Chicago chapter.

In addition to handling her duties as the chapter's leader, Mecklenburg is coordinating the FBA's National Committee Outreach Project.

The project is designed to instill faith in the judicial system among students and others.

FBA chapters across the country are observing April as National Committee Outreach Project Month with a variety of activities.

Some chapters are providing members of the public with free legal advice.

Others are offering tours of federal courthouses or federal agencies.

Still others are bringing students into the courtroom to observe legal proceedings as they

happen or mock hearings.

The Chicago chapter is bringing high school students from Legal Prep Charter Academy in the West Garfield Park neighborhood into the Dirksen Federal Courthouse on April 26 to watch a mock sentencing hearing.

The students will discuss the facts of the case — which more or less track the facts of a real case — in the classroom before the hearing.

U.S. Magistrate Judge M. David Weisman will preside over the proceeding.

Following the hearing, the students will have lunch at The Chicago Bar Association.

Arlander Keys, a retired magistrate judge now working as an arbitrator and mediator, is slated to be the guest speaker.

Keys has spoken to students as part of the program in previous years, Mecklenburg said.

"He talks about what it was like to grow up in the Jim Crow era and he tells them education was his way out," she said. "He's very inspiring."

The program this year is the sixth annual William J. Hibbler Schoolhouse to Courthouse Event.

Hibbler, a federal trial judge, helped plan the first program in 2012 to bring students to Dirksen to observe court proceedings and meet with judges and lawyers.

Hibbler did not get a chance to see the results of his efforts. He died a week before the program was held.

The FBA Chicago chapter named the program for Hibbler following his death and continued to hold it every year, Mecklenburg said.

"We loved it so much," she said, "that I started talking about it to



Sheri H. Mecklenburg

other people in the national organization."

Mecklenburg discovered some other FBA chapters had similar programs and others wanted to start them.

So she led the effort to coordinate the programs nationwide.

The National Community Outreach Project was launched last year with funds from the Federal Bar Association Foundation.

Sixteen FBA chapters took part in the project last year. Thirty-four are participating this year.

The chapters are located in cities that include Oklahoma City, San Diego and Cincinnati and in federal judicial circuits that include the Eastern District of New York and the Central District of Illinois.

The FBA has more than 18,000 members across the country, including 700 in Chicago.

The annual National Community Outreach Project is just one aspect of the FBA's efforts to reach out to the public, said Michael J. Newman, the bar association's national president.

Newman, a magistrate judge who serves on the federal bench in

the Southern District of Ohio, said the FBA conducts civics events year round.

The FBA works with the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts in a nationwide civics education initiative aimed at middle-school and high-school students, Newman said.

As part of that initiative, he said, lawyers and judges go into classrooms during the school year to talk about the court system.

Questions that students ask judges include how they handle a case if they have a bias and what they do if they don't know the answer to a legal question, Newman said.

He said federal judges in the Dayton, Ohio, area alone will speak to at least 1,000 students this year.

Another event that was part of the FBA's civics initiative this year were two essay contests — one for middle schools and the other for high schools — asking students to explain what an impartial judicial system means to them, Newman said.

And he said students come into the courtroom for real or mock proceedings during the entire school year, not just in April.

"We're very interested in helping the next generation learn about the courts," Newman said.

Mecklenburg said the FBA's Chicago chapter has been sending members to Legal Prep once a month during the school year to talk to students about civics.

The program is coordinated by U.S. Magistrate Judge Mary M. Rowland.

The program has proved to be popular, Mecklenburg said.

"We're going to do it next year," she said, "because people really enjoy it."