

Judge on stage: Making good on a campaign promise, Judge Marla Parker of the 47th District Court moved the court to a local high school for a day.



STAFF PHOTO BY SHARON LEMMON

North Farmington students get day in court

BY LARRY O'CONNOR

Something told students filling into the North Farmington High School auditorium this wouldn't be the basic, doze-through-it assembly.

"Jason," barked a teacher at the floor, "Spit it out. No gum, no hats."

The ping from the wad of gum hitting a waste can, along with the rap of the gavel, let the teens know court was in session.

Judge Marla Parker convened 47th District Court March 10 before a packed auditorium of curious students. This is the real thing, which means talking is eschewed along with gum chewing and hat wearing.

"This may look like North Farmington High School," Parker said from a makeshift bench atop the stage. "But for our purposes, this is 47th District Court."

Students learned the function of a district court, and its clerks and a court reporters. From there, they watched as two men were sentenced in separate drunken-driving offenses and later heard testimony during a preliminary examination of a felonious assault case.

The purpose was to bring the court to students rather than have them try to visit the smaller confines of the 47th District chambers. Similar programs are planned in the fall at Harrison

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and Farmington high schools.

A few students dozed in notebooks; a couple rubbed their eyes and yawned. But most were riveted to the proceedings, which included a good number of drinking-and-driving cases.

One defendant spoke to Parker prior to his sentencing. He told how he came home and found it was in dire need of repair. He had four beers before driving out to get a part.

"I'd like to apologize to the court and to the students . . . I know drinking and driving can be a real problem," he said.

Parker suspended all but three days of his 90-day sentence in Oakland County Jail, provided he attend an outpatient program. He also had to pay more than \$1,000 in fines.

Another man, a four-time offender, received a 90-day sentence but has to serve 30 days. He was told to attend an intensive outpatient program, a Mothers Against Driving Drunk Impact Panel, and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings

twice a week. Parker stipulated the man also take the drug Ambrose, which makes people ill when they drink alcohol.

She also had a stern lecture.

"People like you scare me," Parker said. "You're lucky you're not dead. You're lucky you haven't killed someone in the process."

The school bell interrupted testimony in a preliminary examination, but by then, the message already rang home.

"It gets it across to students about drunk driving and other things," said sophomore Jenny Dwyer.

Added senior Sular Oz: "I think it's much more dramatic seeing it live than on Court TV. I think it . . . drove the message home, especially with the guy with the two 15-year-old daughters. He was more sincere."

Those on-stage didn't mind litigating in front of a packed auditorium of high schoolers.

Attorney Christopher M. Ambrose, representing one of the drunken-driving defendants, had been in a similar setting in Ferndale. He said he doesn't believe the circumstances affect the outcome.

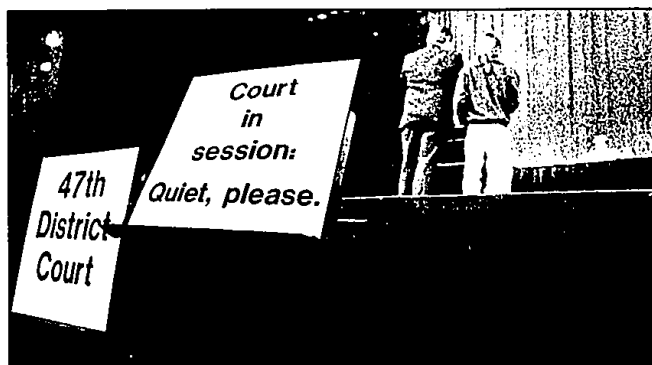
"The judge is real fair," Ambrose said. "Just because we're in front of 600 students, she's not going to make any example of a defendant."



He's sentenced: Attorney Christopher M. Ambrose (right) looks on as his client, Wayne Pendley, is sentenced.



A brief word: Students Nicole Berrong and Kelly Jones talk briefly during court proceedings at North Farmington.



Court for a day: The auditorium stage at North Farmington High School became the 47th District Court for a day.



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