

Law Day

American justice opens itself to scrutiny of students, seniors

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

To County Clerk Lynn Allen, the courthouse is "a place where people come for resolution of life's most serious matters."

Folks rarely drop by just to visit. Last week, though, the court threw open its doors to the public for a special Law Day open house. And more than 500 high-school students and 200 senior citizens took the opportunity to tour offices, courtrooms and hear public officials talk about their jobs.

"It's nice to know we can come here anytime," said Julia Lupp, touring with Addison Township Senior Citizens.

OAKLAND COUNTY Circuit Court held the open house to mark Law Day. The event was a first for the court, which usually just contributes to programs set up by the Oakland County Bar Association.

In 1961, May 1 was designated by congressional resolution as a "special day of celebration by the American people in appreciation of their liberties and the reaffirmation of their loyalty to the United States."

"The courts are proud of what we do. We feel we have something to show you," Circuit Judge Gene Schnetz told one of the tour groups.

In a serious tone, Schnetz told his young listeners that "the very reason you're here is because of the force of the law."

With a smile, he added: "Also you get a day off from school and a chance to harass your teachers."

OAKLAND COUNTY Bar Association president Sheldon Larky explained that Law Day isn't a day for judges or attorneys.

"It's a day set aside for people to learn the distinction between our country and others."

"Our might is not with machine guns or missiles but the pen," he said. "Our courts exist to bring freedom rather than enslavement to our citizens."

All morning four groups visited offices and courtrooms, where actual trials were taking place. Among the stops were the largest county law library in the state and the first computerized court system in the world.

"We continue to seek a more efficient court system," said county clerk Lynn Allen, who added that 24,000 new court cases are started in Oakland County each year.

FOR A GROUP of Rochester High School students enrolled in a Practical Law class taught by Mike Metevier, it was a chance to see the legal system in action.

"Make sure you have no gum in your mouth. We'd hate to have to stop a trial because of that," cautioned deputy probate register Cathy Harrison, leading them into a courtroom where an insurance case was being heard. During a recess, Judge George LaPlata told them not to be surprised by seeing some empty courtrooms.

"If a case finishes, we have to find another quick. Sometimes a courtroom is empty because we're

going crazy trying to find a case," said the West Bloomfield resident.

Lahser High School teacher Beth Brown's students acted out mock trials in their Personal Law and Business Law classes. But visiting Chief Judge Francis X. O'Brien's courtroom made their studies more real.

"The judge was very fair," said Brett Ackerman, 17, of Bloomfield Hills.

"He questioned the attorneys and found holes in their arguments."

WHILE VISITING Clark J. Adams-Philip Pratt Oakland County Law Library, director Richard Beer invited young visitors to use some of the 39,000 volumes for term-paper research.

"We hope to see you do your papers here. We're open to the public 72 hours a week," said Beer.

Friend of the Court mediator Don Slagle explained his job is necessary because "sometimes when people get divorced their feelings are so strong they don't function well as parents."

Around the courthouse, visitors asked questions that have been bothering them.

"Could you do an estate yourself without a lawyer?" one senior citizen asked. "A simple estate," answered a court employee.

"Lady Justice," a lithograph by Pamela Harrington. The blindfolded woman holding the scales of justice has long been a symbol of the legal system.



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