



Appearing in a "Where's the Beef?" T-shirt, witness Paul Tarr of Lansing broke up the audience. Portraying the accomplice, Tarr actually is director of legal services for Michigan Department of Mental Health and directs plays for Okemos Barn Theatre.

It's hard to judge by this courtroom

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

IT'S UP TO the judge to keep order in court. That's not easy when attorneys start showing each other, a defendant is belligerent, the main witness wisecracks or a juror nods off during testimony.

So Michigan's newest judges got a few pointers at a weeklong "school" alerting them to problems they might run into on the bench.

Put on by Michigan Judicial Institute, the continuing education arm of the state Supreme Court, the Lansing-based seminar included a mock trial full of off-the-wall incidents guaranteed to happen to them someday.

"NONE OF THIS is fabricated," said Genesee County Chief Circuit Judge Robert M. Ransom, one of two longtime judges who officiated at the rollicking trial.

"If these people sit on the bench five years, most of the things they saw today will happen to them in one form or another."

Held every other year following the general election, the New Judges Seminar is required of all newly elected jurists. Appointed judges attend on a volunteer basis.

Last week's session in Lansing's Sheraton Inn drew 55 circuit, district and probate judges from all over the state.

Led by experienced jurists, the classes ran the gamut from judicial ethics, evidence and court administration, to pretrial and sentencing.

BUT THE HIGHLIGHT of the week was Thursday's trial in Eaton County Courthouse, a "model" facility built in 1976. Using the spacious Charlotte courtroom usually occupied by Circuit Court Judge Hudson Deming, Ransom and Michigan Court of Appeals Judge Myron H. Wahls let the new judges in on a few professional secrets.

The goal was to show — in a lighthearted way — how a judge's manner can affect the outcome of a trial. And to offer some pointers on how to keep things from going awry.

"You as judge are really center stage. Everyone looks to you for direction," Wahls told the group.

It's important that you exercise that control and don't let things happen that affect your control as judge.

"All the things that happened here today can happen," the former Wayne County Circuit Court judge added. "But if you're aware of them they probably won't."

WITH THE HELP of actors, the two judges presided over the mock trial of a man charged with the armed robbery of a party store.

The over-drawn script included several problems with jurors, sexist comments to the store's cashier by a lawyer, an unruly defendant, a prosecutor waving a gun, attorneys physically fighting with each other and a hearing-impaired witness who needed an interpreter.

Several of the new judges served as jury members, actually taking part in the action. During jury selection, the script called for Westland's 18th District Court Judge Gail McKnight to say that her house had been broken into by juveniles.

Forty-eighth District Judge Edward Sosnick, also a juror, informed the court that the defense attorney's law firm handles his business affairs.

"Would the fact that his law firm represents you affect your decision?" the Bloomfield Hills judge was asked.

"Absolutely not," he said firmly, breaking up his fellow judges.

THE DISTINGUISHED group really fell apart when a witness appeared wearing a "Where's the Beef?" T-shirt and chewing gum and a toothpick. When the witness became difficult, Wahls coolly set him straight.

"Under some circumstances, witnesses may become a pain in the neck. We don't want to have a lower opinion of you," he told the character played by Paul Tarr, who is director of legal services for the Michigan Department of Mental Health and a director for Okemos Barn Theatre.

The daylong production even included a few very practical pointers like how to handle a gun in the courtroom and the suggestion that witnesses spell their names to make things a little easier for the court reporter.

"I never cease to be amazed at the insensitivity of attorneys — including prosecutors — to the handling of a gun in the courtroom," said Ransom after the prosecuting attorney pointed a gun in evidence at the jury box.

"Jurors are very sensitive to this and judges should be aware of that."

LANSING LAW partners Donald L. Reiss and George T. Sinas, who portrayed the prosecutor and defense attorney, helped work up the script for the New Judges Seminar two years ago.

"We tried to pick up some problems in the past,"

he," explained Sinas, who handles personal injury and no-fault law cases for Sinas, Dramis, Brake, Boughton, McIntyre and Reissig.

"Although all these people have lots of experience in court, it's a different perspective being a judge. Some of these things hit judges head on."

ALTHOUGH ON the bench just a short time, many of the new judges have already run into situations they didn't expect.

Fifty-second District Judge Dennis Drury practiced law 18 years before being appointed in July to the Troy court. He was elected to the office in November.

But he'd never encountered two situations presented to him as a judge — a defendant who walked out of a trial and a hearing-impaired defendant who doesn't speak English.

"The first thing you learn as a judge is to expect the unexpected," said Drury, who was looking forward to attending the judges seminar. "Any forewarning allows you to prepare for it."

IN JUST THREE days in 48th District Court, Bloomfield Hills Judge Edward Sosnick's cases ranged from small claims to a hearing on the fate of King Booza, a prize show dog accused of killing his owner's mother.

"You try to get yourself as ready as possible, but it's an entirely different role," said Sosnick, adding that the weeklong seminar really made him think about his new job.

"It makes you pause. You're not an advocate," he explained. "As a judge, you really have to listen."



As a member of the jury, 48th District Judge Edward Sosnick and 18th District Judge Gail McKnight became part of the mock trial script.

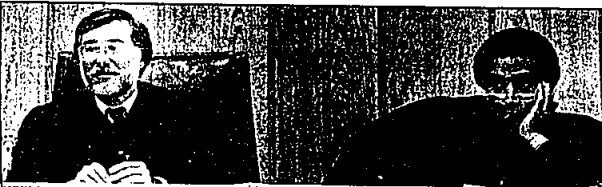


Pointers on handling hearing-impaired and foreign-speaking witnesses were of special interest to 52nd District Judge Dennis C. Drury of Troy.



Sixam in the courtroom was one of the issues dealt with during the mock trial new judges viewed in Eaton County Court. Genesee County Chief Circuit Judge Robert Ransom watches as Lansing attorney George

Sinas ask an attractive witness for her name, address and telephone number. Portraying the victim was Patricia Thomley, a Lansing nurse, who also is with Okemos Barn Theatre.



Staff photos by Dan Dean

Presiding at the rollicking proceedings were Genesee County Chief Circuit Judge Robert Ransom (left) and Michigan Court

of Appeals Judge Myron Wahls. The script called for Wahls to fall asleep at one point during the mock trial.

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