

## The 2010 Florida High School Mock Trial Competition - 20 Years and Still Going Strong

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On the night of May 16, 2009, defendant Chris Byrd held a celebratory party in honor of his youngest son Puck’s high school graduation. Beer and alcohol were available for the adults attending the party – but managed to land in the hands of some of the minors. Later that night, minor Len Kneival, who attended the party, was in a car accident as a result of being intoxicated. Was Chris Byrd responsible for the distribution of alcohol at the party to Kneival and other minors? Did he contribute to the delinquency of a minor while hosting an Open House party? These were the questions posed to high school students from across Florida at the 20th Annual Florida High School Mock Trial State Finals Competition held in Orlando on March 25<sup>th</sup> - March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010 where the fictional case of State of Florida v. Chris Byrd went to trial.

Approximately 1000 students from all 20 Florida judicial circuits worked for over five months to develop and research both sides of the criminal case since its release by the Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc, official state coordinator for the program. Twenty teams advanced to the state finals in Orlando representing 19 of Florida’s 20 judicial circuits. Janeia Daniels, FLREA board member and staff of the Florida State University College of Law

worked to adapt the case to Florida law prior to its release in October. “We wanted to begin selecting cases that would be relevant to high school students,” stated Annette Boyd Pitts, founding Executive Director of the Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc. Early in the school year, students in most districts competed locally for the opportunity to serve on school teams of 6-8 students. School teams participated in county competitions and ultimately went head to head in the courtroom at the circuit level vying for the opportunity to represent their circuit at the State Finals Competition. In some cases, students competed in multiple rounds of competition against 10-15 schools in their individual circuits. Only one team would advance from each circuit to the State Finals at the Orange County Courthouse in March.



*Attorney/Teacher Eric Schwartzreich and students from American Heritage School arrive at the competition.*

At the opening ceremony on March 25 at the Downtown Orlando Marriott, Judge K. Douglas Henderson of Manatee County addressed the students reminding them of the importance of professionalism, ethics and ultimately the rule of law. He encouraged teams and coaches to get to know each other throughout the event and to have fun. Judge Henderson used current articles and personal experiences that highlighted amusing situations that have come before the courts – from the case of the “Balloon Boy” incident to the case of missing chicken nuggets to unique reasons to be released from jury duty. Shortly after the lighthearted review of conflicts that have come before the courts, students began their first round of competition for the 2010 Florida Mock Trial State Finals at the Orange County Courthouse. The first round pairings at the competition were selected randomly with successive rounds being paired through the national power matching model.



*Judge Doug Henderson delivers the opening remarks at the 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Florida High School Mock Trial State Finals.*

Approximately 70 trial attorneys and judges from throughout Florida evaluated the student presentations serving as scoring and presiding judges for the event. Annette Boyd

Pitts, Judge Doug Henderson, and attorney Amber Rumancik of Foley & Lardner in Jacksonville served as lead trainers for the program. Amber participated as a student attorney in the mock trial program when she attended Fletcher High School in Jacksonville. Her teacher, Ed Lange continues to offer this opportunity to his students today. “This program obviously had a tremendous impact on my life,” Amber stated. She continues to promote the program today and often coaches teams in Jacksonville. In addition to the attorney volunteers, paralegals volunteered their time to serve as timekeepers during the event. “The support of the Orange County legal community was extraordinary,” stated Erin Crowe, mock trial program director for the Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc.



*Attorneys from across Florida participated in each round of competition by scoring and critiquing the groups of students.*

Each panel of judges consisted of a presiding judge and two scoring judges as well as an official timekeeper. For many of those who participate, this is one of the most rewarding experiences of their careers. Attorney Nancy Brandt of the Bogin, Munns & Munns law firm commented that “The program...is an asset to the State of Florida

legal community and citizenry as a whole...The poise, confidence, demeanor and respect demonstrated...were simply outstanding. This is a wonderful program for high school students with an interest in the law and for all students no matter their professional calling.” As students progress through the four rounds of competition, it is difficult to realize that they are high school students. “Their professionalism, knowledge of the law, and ability to think on their feet in the courtroom this year was unprecedented,” stated Judge Henderson. One trial attorney who participated for the first year was astonished at the quality of the student presentations. Upon requesting that he be invited to participate in the program next year, he commented “Great! That will give me something to live for.”



*Orlando Attorney Doug Goldin served as a Presiding Judge during the competition. “I wasn’t sure who was having more fun, me or the high school students,” Mr. Goldin commented.*

Students are provided with a critique at the end of each round delivered by the seasoned judges and attorneys. It is in these moments that students are able to connect with members of the legal and judicial communities and learn from those who have chosen law as a career. Many students walk

away with advice they will carry into following rounds of competition and out into the world. This year, attorney Julie Walbroel Pardy, who is remembered by many Mock Trial students for her invaluable advice on courtroom demeanor and confidence, actually asked a student to redo their opening statement without using notes during the critique. She said the student's opening statement was a "perfect 10" without the use of notes. By doing this, Julie encouraged the student to recognize her own confidence and skill in the courtroom.



*Students await the announcement of teams who would progress to the final round of competition in the rotunda of the Orange County Courthouse.*

After three days and four rounds of competition, the students waited in anticipation for the announcement of the two teams who would compete in the final round of competition on Saturday evening. The anxiety and anticipation of the students, teachers, and attorney coaches was felt during the announcements in the rotunda of the Orange County Courthouse. J.M. Tate High School of Escambia County and the Community School of Naples were the top two teams selected to compete in the final round of competition on Saturday evening. Teachers Amanda Brown of Tate High

School and Jason Scott of Community School of Naples met in the middle of the rotunda to draw their respective roles in the final round. Tate drew the role of defense and Naples represented the prosecution in the final round of competition during the Florida High School Mock Trial Competition.

The ceremonial courtroom of the Orange County Courthouse has breathtaking views of the city of Orlando from the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor of the building. However, the students in this courtroom were focused solely on the case at hand and quickly took their places to argue the case for the final time. As the gallery filled with observers, the students of J.M. Tate High School and Community School of Naples stood for the final round judges as they entered the courtroom. Judge Doug Henderson served as presiding judge for the event and six additional scoring judges, including Acting FLREA Board President Noel Lawrence, Amber Rumancik, Juan Lopez-Campillo, Julie Walbroel Pardy, Daniel Gutierrez, and LRE Committee Member Melina Buncome-Williams evaluated the student presentations.



*The final round of competition takes place in the ceremonial courtroom of the Orange County Courthouse.*

The awards banquet featured the top five team awards as well as a wide variety of best attorney and best witness awards. Additionally teams were eligible to win one of four Legal Professionalism Awards named in honor of Stephen Shenkman, FLREA board president who died in late 2007. The Stephen C. Shenkman Legal Professionalism awards were presented to teams that exhibited the “highest ideals and tenets of the legal profession through character, competence, and commitment” throughout the competition. This year, there were an outstanding number of nominations for this award resulting in 5 schools receiving this honor. Based on peer nominations, awards went to Columbia High School of Lake City, The Bolles School of Jacksonville, Atlantic High School of Volusia County, Baker County High School, and Pinellas Park High School.



*Teacher Ed Johnson and students from Baker County High School accept one of four awards for Legal Professionalism.*

This year, the students receiving the top witness awards were Christian Mieres of Marion Technical Institute in Marion County, Roger Walker of Pinellas Park High School in Pinellas County, Joselyn Markel of Boone High School in Orange County,

and Robbie Pomeroy of American Heritage in Broward County. These students all delivered exceptional portrayals of characters depicted in the case and maintained this character while being questioned by attorneys from their team as well as the opposing counsel.



*Christian Mieres of Marion Technical Institute accepts one of the four top witness awards.*

The top attorneys in this year's competition displayed an exceptional mastery of their roles – from their abilities to deliver insightful opening statements to responding to objections from opposing counsel to artfully crafted closing statements. The students receiving Attorney of the Year Awards this year included Collin Metcalf of J.M. Tate High School in Escambia County, Charlene Ochogo of Lincoln High School in Leon County, and Karina Hardvel of Our Lady of Lourdes Academy in Miami-Dade County. The top attorney award was presented to the student with the most votes from judges overall. This honor went to Emmanuel McMiller of Palm Beach Lakes Community High School in Palm Beach County. Mr. McMiller, a law magnet student, was awarded the Stephen C. Shenkman Scholarship in the amount of \$2,500 as well as a plaque.



*Emmanuel McMiller of Palm Beach Lakes Community High School accepts the award for top attorney and the Stephen C. Schenkman Scholarship from FLREA Executive Director Annette Boyd Pitts, Attorney Amber Rumancik, and FLREA Board Member, Noel Lawrence.*

Team awards were presented to the top five teams including in fifth place Palm Beach Lakes Community High School; fourth place Boone High School in Orange County; and in third place Lincoln High School of Leon County. The students of both top two teams, J.M. Tate High School and Community School of Naples, were brought to the front of the ballroom to be recognized for their achievement. The students of J.M. Tate High School erupted into a frenzy of excitement as their team was announced the winner of the 2010 Florida High School Mock Trial State Finals Competition and the Florida representative at the 2010 National Finals in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in May. First year mock trial teacher Amanda Brown was overwhelmed with emotion as her team accepted their first place lady of justice trophy. Mrs. Brown initiated the Mock Trial program at J. M. Tate High School as a senior student with former coach Kelly Krostag. The year after her graduation, Tate won state and represented Florida at the National competition. This year, Mrs.

Brown will have her chance as a teacher to represent Florida at the National Finals.



*Teacher Amanda Brown and students from J.M. Tate High School will represent Florida at the 2010 National Mock Trial Competition in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in May.*

Evaluations received from students reported an increase in their trust and confidence in the judicial branch as a result of participating in the program. Career interests were also explored as many students realized their capacity to handle complex legal arguments and think on their feet in responding to legal challenges. Teachers reported a variety of increased skills in their students such as critical thinking,

professional speaking skills, organizational skills, and strategies to advance their case.

A companion program was instituted four years ago to improve student understanding of the appellate process. The Florida High School Brief Writing and Moot Court Competition incorporate an issue on appeal from the mock trial case and students write briefs and present oral arguments in the appellate courts. The Florida Bar Appellate Law Section assists with sponsorship of this program. The final round is held at the Florida Supreme Court.

The Florida Bar Foundation provides funding assistance for the Florida High School Mock Trial and Moot Court Competitions. The Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc is a principal grantee of the Florida Bar Foundation. For more information on these and other law related education initiatives, you can visit our website at [www.flrea.org](http://www.flrea.org) or contact Annette Boyd Pitts at [ABPflreaED@aol.com](mailto:ABPflreaED@aol.com).