

Judge George Mertz: Mentoring Future Legal Pros

“In a society where an emphasis is put on immediate results, the kids learn what it is to have perseverance, dedication, and a commitment to putting in long hours in order to ultimately be successful. I believe these skills make for stronger adults and a stronger community.”

Judge George Mertz isn't just describing the local youth program with which he participates, but he is also describing the bigger picture in the Michigan judiciary.

As Chief Judge of the 46th Circuit Court—serving Crawford, Kalkaska, Otsego Counties—Judge Mertz was first appointed in January 2013. Since 2014, he has volunteered to coach students at Gaylord St. Mary High School through the local YMCA's “Youth in Government Model Judiciary Program.” Or MJP, says Judge Mertz, for short.

Judge Mertz followed in the footsteps of his predecessor, the late Judge Dennis Murphy, when he took up the mantle of volunteering with MJP—something he says was very important to him.

“I think we all had mentors who helped us grow and become successful adults—I know I did. I think it is critical that young people today have adults who can help them grow and develop the skills and confidence that will benefit them their entire lives,” he shared.

Judge Mertz says that it is also personally rewarding to watch these young “lawyers” start from scratch and develop into confident individuals, fearlessly arguing a case in front of a room of spectators.

“Like any coach, I get fired up during the competition when they make a good argument or give a correct response to an objection, and am there to explain and help them work out problems and mistakes,” he remarked. “I enjoy watching them compete and seeing the hours of work and practice pay off for them.”

Judge Mertz believes this program benefits the kids by teaching them critical thinking skills, how to analyze a problem, and how to present themselves publicly with confidence and competence.

“Coach” Mertz also says that the students learn about working toward a long-term goal. To get ready for a legal competition in the spring, they started working in October and will spend months on preparation and practice in order to be able to perform in March. He calls it “a marathon, not a sprint.”

Judge Mertz believes that judges have a duty to set as example in the community for everyone—young and old. “We are public figures and, like it or not, people notice what we do both in and out of the courtroom,” he shared. “That visibility gives us a unique opportunity to

be role models to young people and to inspire adults to get involved—whether it's in a youth program, such as this, or other community or charitable organizations.”