

Mock Trial at 25: Chair Mary Bassett still feels “awesome responsibility”

Volunteers, \$25,000 Brown Rudnick donation crucial to program’s success

BY BILL ARCHAMBEAULT

More than a dozen years ago, Concord attorney Mary E. Bassett was recruited to volunteer as an attorney-judge for the Massachusetts Bar Association’s Mock Trial Program, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.

Bassett, the chair of this year’s Mock Trial Committee, remembers feeling nervous as she prepared to judge her first trial, in Ayer District Court, because she wanted to do a good job for the students.

“Once I did it, I was totally hooked,” she said, noting that Ayer District Court First Justice Peter J. Kilmartin loaned his robes to Bassett to help her look the part. “I could see how much fun the kids were having doing it and how much work they were putting into it. It was very important to them. Every time I judge a case, I feel an awesome responsibility.”

That responsibility has only increased since Bassett joined the Mock Trial Committee seven years ago. Committee members create each year’s case — alternating between civil and criminal cases each year — constructing the facts and characters in cases that are relevant and interesting to high school students.

The goal is to come up with cases that challenge the students without overwhelming them with legal minutiae. And topics like sexual harassment, or last year’s case involving a defense claim of post-traumatic stress disorder by an Iraq War veteran, must be engaging but also sensitive to participants who may have personal experiences with the issues at the center of the cases.

Perhaps most challenging is making sure that both sides have a fair chance of winning the case. “We always want to make sure that it’s balanced,” she said.

For its silver anniversary, the 2010 Mock Trial Program is reaching out to

past participants to collect their memories and lessons learned as they graduated and become professionals. The program has once again been sponsored by a \$25,000 donation from Brown Rudnick LLP, through its Center for the Public Interest.

“The MBA needs that sponsorship and support, and for them to step forward every year is key to the success of the program,” Bassett said, crediting Brown Rudnick for showing consistent interest in and support for the program.

“There are very tough decisions to be made about what programs to support” during “these lean times,” she said.

The program also depends on its volunteer coaches and judges. Bassett wants lawyers to know that they’re

needed, and that they may be better qualified than they think. Attorney-coaches work directly with the teams of high school students and their teacher-coaches to prepare for the simulated cases.

“You get to work directly with high school students. They really need the lawyer-coach to help them prepare their case for a trial situation,” she said. “It lets the public see lawyers participating with local kids. I think lawyers want to get involved in their local community, and this is a great way for them to do that.

Bassett wants to dispel any concerns that only trial attorneys are qualified to volunteers as attorney-coaches or attorney-judges. Training for attorney judges is scheduled for early January.

“It’s something any lawyer can do. Every lawyer understands the basic rules of evidence. It’s more about helping them think like a lawyer. You really don’t need to have trial experience,” she said. “It’s certainly not too late for lawyers to become involved this year. I’d like to encourage lawyers to try it.” ■



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MOCK TRIAL COMMITTEE CHAIR
MARY E. BASSETT