

Press Clippings - 2/25/2025

- Northwest Herald/McHenry County - Practicing law: McHenry County courthouse hosts 1st high school mock trial meet

Huntley High School among 14 teams to participate.

Organizers hope more join next year.

By: Amanda Marrazo

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Huntley's Sydney Sullivan questions a witness during the 2025 McHenry County Mock Trial Open on Friday, Feb. 14, 2025, at the McHenry County Courthouse in Woodstock.

A high school senior threw a party to make new friends – but when the pot brownies served turned out to be laced with fentanyl and a popular teen partygoer was hospitalized, the senior wound up in a McHenry County courtroom defending herself against felony charges of possession of fentanyl with intent to deliver and aggravated battery.



Huntley's Sydney Sullivan questions a witness during the 2025 McHenry County Mock Trial Open on Friday, Feb. 14, 2025, at the McHenry County Courthouse in Woodstock.

This fictitious criminal case played out Friday during the inaugural mock trial competition held in the McHenry County courthouse in Woodstock. The pretend defendant, Peyton Reed, was

played Hannah Greenberg, 17, a junior from South Elgin High School, who was among more than 100 students from 14 schools throughout the state who participated.

The made-up case was prepared by the Illinois Bar Association's Standing Committee's Law Related Education for the Public. Friday's event was hosted by the judicial circuit court in conjunction with the ISBA. It was organized by attorney Timothy Brandner, managing partner with Brody Brandner Ltd. in Huntley.



The remaining time is shown during the 2025 McHenry County Mock Trial Open on Friday, Feb. 14, 2025, at the McHenry County Courthouse in Woodstock.

Teams compete with a memorized 70-page scripted problem. Students portray defense attorneys, prosecutors, witnesses and, of course, the defendant. There trial has exhibits, objections and arguments. Each team participates twice at a meet, taking turns playing prosecutor and defense.

Brandner said that students argue cases each year from relevant topics depicting a potential real-life scenarios. The trial case in 2024 concerned a defendant who crashed his vehicle after driving 15 hours and being distracted by a cellphone.

On Friday in Courtroom 301, South Elgin High School students played the part of "Reed's" defense team as Huntley High School students portrayed the prosecution.

The state's opening arguments were presented by Lis Gentil, 17, a junior at Huntley High, the only McHenry County school to participate. Gentil told the "jurors" that the defendant threw a party in a mansion in Lincolnville – an imaginary Illinois town – and her "lack of responsibility almost lead to the loss of a beloved high school student."

Outside court, Gentil said that being part of mock trial helps critical thinking, her social skills and speaking skills. She said she wants to become a psychologist someday – and if that doesn't happen, a lawyer.

"Putting yourself out there into that sort of lawyer world and environment helps you get a feeling of how it would be to be a real lawyer, and that is something really great and unique," she said.

The case was argued in seven different courtrooms by different teams, and each team was scored by volunteer attorneys and judges. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire took first place.

Mock trial is an event that proponents say is beneficial to students in many ways.

“I think mock trial not only exposes the students to being advocates, but it teaches them to think on their feet, to prepare arguments, and overcome anxiety of public speaking,” said McHenry County Judge Robert Zalud, who presided over the Huntley and South Elgin high school teams and also participated in mock trial in high school. “Communication that isn’t behind a screen is becoming a rare skill.”

Geneva-based attorney Matthew Haiduk, who represents clients in McHenry County, volunteers as an adviser to the South Elgin team. He called mock trial “an amazing opportunity for young men and women to learn skills they’ll use throughout their lives. We are very happy to see this contest in McHenry County.” Haiduk said Huntley “was very well prepared [Friday] as always. He wishes more McHenry County schools would participate.

Haiduk said his team “did well,” and now it is time to gear up for the state meet in March set to be held in Springfield.

Cindy Fuhrer, science department chair at Huntley High and mock trial team coach for the last 20 years, said Friday was her team’s first-ever competition. She said team members recognized where they needed improvement and did “much better” at their competition the following day at Maine South High School in Park Ridge.



Huntley's Sydney Sullivan confers with her teammate, Navjot Khaira, as she questions a witness during the 2025 McHenry County Mock Trial Open on Friday, Feb. 14, 2025, at the McHenry County Courthouse in Woodstock.

Fuhrer said mock trials teach students how to present themselves, how to talk in public, a lot of those 21st century skills they need. The lessons taught in mock trial do not only apply to speaking in front of large groups, but to speaking one-on-one with someone, such as in an interview.

Students learn how to “tell people their thoughts and put them together; they definitely learn to think on their feet,” Fuhrer said.

Huntley sophomore Sydney Sullivan, 16, played the role of a prosecutor. Now in her second year of mock trials, the Lake in the Hills teen is a team captain.

“I love mock trial,” she said. “I like it because I want to pursue a career in law, and I think it is a really cool way to dip your toes in.”

She said mock trial can definitely help boost someone’s confidence and teach them critical thinking, as well as how to “respond to things that are happening in real time and say things on [their] feet.” She also likes that being part of mock trial has led to many close friendships.

Brandner, who organized the event, said he thought the day was “a resounding success” and hopes organizers “can build on our efforts and join the list of counties that offer this opportunity to students annually.”



McHenry County Judge Robert J. Zulud talks about how the high school students did present a car in front of him heir during 2025 McHenry County Mock Trial Open on Friday, Feb. 14, 2025, at the McHenry County Courthouse in Woodstock.