



## FROM COURTROOMS TO ZOOM ROOMS

How the San Diego County High School Mock Trial Competition Pivoted to All-Virtual in 2021

By Ron Marcus

The 2020 High School Mock Trial Competition was a rousing success. By the numbers, 607 students from 32 high schools competed, with four rounds of competition and 69 trials. 75 attorneys served as volunteer coaches, 255 attorneys volunteered as scorers, and there were 75 courtroom monitors too. But the numbers can't tell the story of how the lives of all involved, from students and teachers to attorneys and judges, were inexorably enhanced by the experience. The best evidence of this was the Superior Court jury lounge on the final day of competition, packed with hundreds of teens and their adult supporters whooping and cheering as the 2020 winners were announced.

That was February 22, 2020. Just one month later, the county, state, and much of the country were on COVID-19 lockdown. The euphoria of one of the best years in the competition's 14-year history was immediately replaced with doubt, and the question, "What now?"

It would be natural to assume that, like so many programs that were canceled last year with schools in lockdown, the competition would need to take a year off. Indeed, Hon. Laura J. Birkmeyer, co-Chair of the Mock Trial committee since 2017 and Chair for 2021, had heard from at least one colleague, "Well, if you have to skip a year, you have to skip a year."

But then the San Diego High School Mock Trial committee heard from teachers and coaches. With so many other school programs canceled or deferred to the following spring, it was clear that the students really needed the competition to go on, some way, somehow. Encouragingly, the Constitutional Rights Foundation (CRF), sponsor of the statewide competition, was moving forward with the program virtually. So was Los Angeles County, which puts on the largest competition in the state. The decision became a fait accompli: the San Diego County competition must go on!

Thank goodness for Zoom, which became the primary platform for the competition. Deciding to use Zoom was easy; figuring out how to coordinate hundreds of participants in multiple Zoom breakout rooms was not. Fortunately, members of the Mock Trial Committee were able to volunteer at the Los Angeles competition in late 2020, gaining valuable insight into how it could be done. This, plus countless hours of planning and administration work, resulted in a process that worked remarkably well — from the advance remote training sessions for teachers, students, judges, coaches, scorers, and monitors, to the competition and closing award ceremonies.

Despite missing out on being in physical courtrooms and working together in person, the students got largely the same benefits as students had in the past — gaining confidence, sharpening speaking skills, forging new friendships, learning the justice system, and, for many, becoming inspired to pursue a future career in the law. Many students considered it one of the most rewarding experiences of their lives. Teachers did too.

In the end, 28 teams and 548 students competed in 6 rounds of competition. 54 state and federal judges/commissioners presided over 60 trials. 80 attorneys volunteered to coach teams and 148 helped score the competition. These would be great numbers in any year, made all the more remarkable by the unprecedented challenges that were overcome during the pandemic.

With 2022 on the horizon, the Mock Trial committee is excited not only to resume in-person competition, but to also take everything that was learned in lockdown about leveraging technology and create the best mock trial competition experience yet for everyone.



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