



Thursday, April 24, 2003

Courtroom class teaches judicial process

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

Courtroom 3B at the Oakland County Circuit Court in Pontiac is abuzz. The jury stand is full; the wooden gallery benches are packed. The **Honorable Judge Fred Mester** is expected at any moment, but the room contains no defendants to try, no witnesses to cross-examine, no opening statements or closing remarks to hear, no court reporter, no bailiffs.

Judge Mester arrives just short of 6:30 p.m., wearing a suit instead of his characteristic black robe. Mester's class is now in session.

Oakland University students in PS 342, "The Judicial Process," meet each Thursday evening to learn about the operation of the U.S. court system from one of its practitioners in his own courtroom. It's the first time OU has offered such a class in such a setting.

Classroom topics include court organization and administration; the role of judges, attorneys and courtroom players; the nature of civil and criminal justice processes; judicial selection; and the policy-making role of courts. The U.S. Supreme Court is Mester's major focus, though he also covers state and local courts.

Students benefit not only from the experience Mester brings to the class but also from its setting.

"The best part about the class is that it's taught by a judge and placed in a real courtroom," said junior Michaelene Sowinski, who currently works as a paralegal and is considering a law career. "He gives us a lot of real world experience rather than just reading about it in a textbook."

Mester chose to hold the class in his courtroom to give his students a sense of its role in the judicial process. He also provides extra credit to students who attend a motion hearing.

"I think the courtroom flavor plays a part in the way we make decisions," said Mester, who has previously taught paralegal courses at OU and at other institutions. "Every part of the room plays a factor in the decision. I also bring in speakers and describe some of my own experiences and present involvement to try to give my students more than just the facts and realities, but also the personality of the judicial process so they can feel the human factor that drives it.

"I just love teaching. When you teach about the foundation of the law, you learn yourself because you have to reexamine it on a regular basis."

Mester often adds interesting anecdotes to his lectures, such as the time a lawyer asked if he could approach the bench when a juror fell asleep in the middle of a trial. He also brought a prosecutor, court administrator and defense attorney to speak to the class to give students an idea of their career options. It's all part of Mester's effort to teach the nuts and bolts of courtroom policies and procedures and their relationship to the larger American political and social system.

"It's really cool to see Judge Mester actually perform his daily job," said junior Lori Fry, who attended one of his motion hearings. "It gives you a real feel for what he's doing, so you see him as a judge and not just a teacher. He has two totally different personas. He's very professional in the courtroom and has complete control – you can tell that the other lawyers really respect him. In class, we have really good discussions on the fine points of the law, and he actually has a good sense of humor. I didn't expect that from a judge."

Classroom discussions often break out when Mester asks his students to consider legal rulings and the impact they've had on other social issues. In one class, Mester asked his students to discuss the potential ramifications of the Supreme Court's upcoming decision on whether affirmative action programs should be used as a factor in admissions to state-funded colleges.

"We have very good discussions in class," Fry said. "Judge Mester is not easy. You have to be a pretty good student to do well. His weekly quizzes force you to be on top of the material. It's certainly not a blow-off class, but he also makes it fun."

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SUMMARY

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