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## OU's Project Upward Bound gives students inside look at court, potential careers in law

Oakland University's **Project Upward Bound** (PUB), a multi-faceted college preparatory enrichment program, recently provided 25 high school students with an opportunity to learn more about the court system, including the roles of the judge, prosecutor, defense attorney and witnesses.

"I thought it was fun, and I learned a lot," said Tamara Barnes, a student at the Pontiac Academy for Excellence High School.

Barnes was one of 25 Pontiac- area high school students who visited the 50<sup>th</sup> District Court in Pontiac on Thursday, June 28 as part of PUB's annual Career Day.

"Most of these students have not had an experience with the court system, so I wanted them to experience that firsthand," said Geraldine Graham, project director for PUB. "Also, when we think about the court, most of the time we just think about the judge. I wanted them to be aware of the other positions that are available, what it takes to get them, and what they need to do now to prepare to be successful in college if they want to pursue some of those careers."



Judge Cynthia Walker gives advice to "Judge" Diamond Jackson during the mock trial.

The Project Upward Bound College Prep Academy is under the umbrella of the TRIO Programs, which were established when Congress passed the Higher Education Act of 1965, now known as the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA). A federally funded program, PUB has been in place at Oakland University since 1966 and serves 133 students per year. Its mission is to provide academic, social, cultural and career enrichment that prepares students to succeed in higher education.

"One of the ways we do that is to provide them with experiences that they would likely not otherwise be able to have," Graham said. "In low-income communities, you don't see role models of careers that require a degree. That's what Career Day is for, it gives them exposure to career options that require a higher level of education."

The students who participated in PUB's annual Career Day event on June 28 spent the morning learning about how the court works, including the layout of the courtroom, the docket for the day, and proper behavior in the courtroom. They also met with the judges — Chief Judge Cynthia Thomas Walker, Judge Ronda Fowlkes Gross, Judge Michael Martinez and Chief Judge Pro-Tem Preston Thomas — who explained what happens in their courtrooms, as well as the roles of the prosecutor and defense attorney in the legal process.

The judges also introduced the courtroom staff, including the court officer, pretrial services staff, court recorder and court administrator, who explained their jobs and the experience, training and education that prepared them for the role.

"I thought it was pretty cool," said Briana Travis, a student at Oak Park High School. "I really enjoyed talking to the judges, and learning about the different jobs people have in the court system."

The students also had an opportunity to observe a video arraignment, learn about the importance of jury duty and participate in a mock trial with Judge Walker, who has served on the 50<sup>th</sup> District Court bench since September 2003 and was appointed



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“It’s so important to engage young people in the legal process,” Walker said.

The mock trial featured a man named Tony, played by student Octavio Alvarez, who was accused of breaking his neighbor’s windows with rocks. The prosecution — played by students Da’Ron Guthery, Danielle George and Faith Mullen — argued that Tony had been caught in the act with a rock in his hand. The defense — played by students La’Taija Nails, Jy Smith and Tashae Clark — argued that no one had actually seen Tony throwing the rocks.

“I’ve wanted to be a lawyer since I was 10 years old, so this was a great experience,” George said.

After calling several “witnesses” to the stand the defense and prosecution rested their cases, which left Tony’s fate in the hands of the “jury,” which was also played by students. After several minutes of deliberation, the jury returned with their verdict: not guilty!

“I was so impressed by these students,” Judge Walker said after the verdict was read. “We had some serious talent in the courtroom today.”

According to Graham, the students’ visit to the court was the result of a collaborative effort between Project Upward Bound, Judge Walker of the 50<sup>th</sup> District Court and Professor David Dulio from the Center of Civic Engagement at OU.

To learn more about Project Upward Bound, visit [www.oakland.edu/upwardbound](http://www.oakland.edu/upwardbound).



Neveah Hogans played a "witness" during the mock trial.



Scholars from OU's Project Upward Bound with Assistant Prosecuting Attorney Leen Nachawati (left) and Judge Cynthia Walker (fifth from left) following the mock trial.