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The Leonard L. Williams Justice Center hosts 48 teams from across the country in 2024 National High School Mock Trial Championship

Team from Abington Heights High School in Pennsylvania takes top spot

More than 450 high school students from across the country and teams from overseas competed in the National High School Mock Trial Championship at the Leonard L. Williams Justice Center on May 3-4, 2024 in Wilmington, Delaware.

After four rounds of competition over the two days, the team from Abington Heights High School in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania faced off against Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing Arts in Dallas, Texas in the fifth and final round, with Pennsylvania taking the national title.

The final round was presided over by Delaware Supreme Court Chief Justice Collins J. Seitz, Jr., Justice Abigail LeGrow and Justice N. Christopher Griffiths.

“It has been 16 years since Delaware last hosted this national competition. It was a wonderful opportunity to showcase the depth and breadth of the Delaware bench and bar,” said Daniel Attaway 2024 National Championship Host Director and longtime Delaware High School Mock Trial Co-Chair. “It’s amazing to think that, including all the students, their coaches and parents and supporters, over 1,100 people had a chance to experience everything that Delaware has to offer.”

National High School Mock Trial Championship Chair Paul Kaufman said that more than 40,000 high school students from over 3,000 schools, supported by some 11,000 volunteers, participate in the competitions that make up the national competition every year. This year, the 40th anniversary for the competition, that number was narrowed down after local-level contests to 48 teams – two from Delaware, 43 state championship teams from outside Delaware and three from overseas: South Korea, Guam, and the Northern Marianas Islands.

Delaware is well known for its expertise in corporate law, and the case that student teams had to argue at the championship reflected that, presenting the students with a corporate shareholder dispute. Specifically, the teams argued a suit over cell phone cases created by a fictional company called QuikPhone, founded and led by popular and charismatic owner and movie star Bree Plaza (a nod to Wilmington native and actress Aubrey Plaza). Unfortunately for QuikPhone, the phone cases allegedly broke down in extreme heat and caused lasting neurological damage to users, a development that ultimately bankrupted the company. In the mock lawsuit, a group of rabid Plaza fans and QuikPhone investors allege Plaza did not in fact actively run the company, misleading them into buying stock, and that Plaza’s recklessness as CEO led to the failure of the company, costing them millions. Student teams had to argue each side of the case, twice representing the plaintiff and twice the defendant. No “winner” was declared at the end of the case; instead, each team was judged on their courtroom performances and how well they demonstrated their understanding of the law, legal issues, and trial

procedures, and how well the student witnesses portrayed compelling, credible characters while helping make the team's case.

Kaufman, a former mock trial competitor who was part of the team from St. Mark's High School that went to the National Championships from 1993-96 and placed second in the nation in 1995, wrote the case with longtime co-author Jonathan Grode, a Philadelphia attorney, and Benjamin Wallace, a member of the Wilmington Charter team that placed third in the country when Wilmington last hosted, in 2008. Kaufman said mock trial was a life-changing experience for him. "I am sure, when some of these students look back, they will also find that being here had a big impact," he said. In Kaufman's case, it led to his career as an Assistant United States Attorney. "These students are truly amazing. They mastered one of the most complex areas of corporate law in only five weeks, and our volunteers – experienced attorneys and distinguished judges in their day jobs – could not stop talking about the level of performance that they saw in every one of the 97 trials this weekend. Whether or not they choose to pursue a career in the law, they will all go far and do great things with the skills they have learned and the confidence they have gained through mock trial," he said.

Betsy Renzo, Executive Director of the Delaware Law-Related Education Center (that helped sponsor and organize the competition), estimated that the competition brought in more than \$3 million to the Wilmington economy. "Riverfront hotels and restaurants were overflowing for nearly six days in a row," she said, along with several hotels downtown near the Justice Center.

Rounding out the top 10 winners in the 2024 championship, from third to tenth place were: high schools from Virginia, Iowa, Florida, South Carolina, Tennessee, California, Ohio and Georgia. And the team from North Carolina was awarded the Larry Bakko Professionalism and Civility Award.

Because there was an uneven number of teams that registered, the Delaware Host Committee was allowed to recruit a second Delaware team to compete. So in addition to the Delaware State Mock Trial Champions from Wilmington Charter, the second-place team from Newark Charter was invited to compete. Ultimately, Newark Charter finished in the top half of teams at 21st and Wilmington Charter finished 39th.

Several other contests were also held over the two days of the National Championship, including best courtroom sketch artist, which was won by Katie Smith of Georgia and best courtroom journalist, won by Aileen Ukwuoma of New Mexico.

Kaufman and Attaway thanked the hundreds of volunteers and members of the legal community from the region that turned out to help make the competition happen by volunteering as either presiding judges, scoring judges, or support staff. "In particular, I want to thank the Delaware Judiciary for graciously allowing us to essentially take over the Leonard Williams Justice Center for two days and host this event. It is a wonderful facility, and the entire Delaware legal community provided a first-rate experience that none of these students will ever forget. These attorneys and judges changed lives this weekend, we cannot thank the court's entire staff enough for their assistance, patience, and support over the last two years and this weekend," said Kaufman.

