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Sussex County Class Participates in Virtual Visit with Court of Common Pleas

Late last month, the entire seventh grade class of 225 students from Mariner Middle School paid a visit to a Delaware Court of Common Pleas courtroom without ever leaving their classroom chairs.

The students were led on a tour of the courtroom by Court of Common Pleas Judge Katharine L. Mayer and included brief chats with a prosecutor, defense attorney, bailiff, court reporter, law clerk and her judicial colleague, Court of Common Pleas Judge Monica A. Horton. The idea initially started as a scheduled video call over the video platform Zoom with one small class at Mariner Middle, but once word got around the school other teachers in the seventh grade asked to join in and soon the entire seventh grade was involved.

Judge Mayer learned that the school wasn't able to take a field trip to the courthouse and so she worked to bring the courthouse to the school via Zoom on March 22, 2024. "We want to give students the chance to learn about the legal system and to understand how it works by continuing the education process through a personal approach. We don't want them to be afraid of it or think that court is a scary place, but rather look forward to opportunities for a career path with the courts," she said.

The visit is believed to be the first time any Delaware judge has offered such a virtual tour to a school group. The Zoom call – which took place while court was out of session – lasted about an hour. During the visit, Judge Mayer introduced each person in the room and had them describe their role in court and how they came to be involved in the legal profession. She then interviewed the participants in response to questions from the students that were submitted in advance. The judge hopes that the virtual tour will not be a one-time occurrence and that she and other judges will be able to offer similar educational opportunities in the future to other classes. And to that end the Delaware Judiciary will be working with the Delaware Law Related Education Center to investigate hosting similar tours in the future as part of ongoing outreach efforts.

"The virtual tour ... was an incredible experience," said Christina Hastings, the 7th Grade Team Leader at Mariner Middle. "Not only did the students see the workings of the justice system, but they were also given an opportunity to see the many career possibilities in the justice system. Providing students with real-world experiences is the missing link in many middle schools. Demonstrating possibilities for post-education opportunities is a benefit for all students."

The virtual visit comes just weeks after the Delaware Supreme Court held oral arguments in Sussex County for the first time in its history, at Delaware Technical and Community College in Georgetown, as part of its school outreach efforts. During that program, after the arguments had concluded, the justices also answered questions from an invited crowd of high school and college students.