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Attorneys Megan L. Piltzof Sabatini and Associates and Michael D. Neubert, Pepe and Monteith talk to students from Northwestern Regional School District No. 7 at the historic Litchfield Law School.



Connecticut Appellate Court Judge Eliot Prescott leads fellow judges Alexandra DiPentima and Michael Sheldon from the Tapping Reeve House in Litchfield to the Litchfield Law School building to hear two cases on Thursday.

Old School Justice

By JOHN FITTS

LITCHFIELD — American law came full circle in Litchfield Thursday as a group of young scholars came to one of the profession’s most historic places to see the state judicial system in action.

Thursday morning, the Connecticut Appellate Court heard two arguments at the historic Litchfield Law School, part of the historic Tapping Reeve complex near the center of town.

Chief Judge Alexandra D. DiPentima said it was a poignant day sitting in the 1784 structure where Tapping Reeve taught the intricacies of law to so many historical figures. Next door, nine students from Howard Winterson’s law and justice class at Northwestern Regional School District No. 7 watched the proceedings on closed-circuit television.

Many involved said those historic aspects, combined with the educational opportunities and impending changes in the area’s court system, made the day special.

“It made it particularly meaningful for all of us,” DiPentima said.

For the proceedings, DiPentima, two other judges, attorneys, a small judicial support staff and a handful of viewers squeezed their way into the approximate 900-square foot one-room schoolhouse. Natural wood grain and simple furnishings contrasted starkly with bright spotlights, a CTN video crew, plastic cups and a few iPads and laptops.

The students watched the proceedings on closed-circuit television at The Tapping Reeve House and listened intently as attorneys argued the merits of



Judges Michael R. Sheldon, Chief Judge Alexandra D. DiPentima and Eliot D. Prescott.

legal questions in two somewhat unusual appeals that came down to technical details. First was the interpretation of the meaning and legislative intent of “in plain view,” State of Connecticut v. John Panek, a dismissed criminal case that involved whether voyeurism charges apply to the unauthorized recording or photographing of a consensual sexual act.

The second case, Maria Diaz v. Manchester Memorial Hospital, comes down to the concept of “constructive notice.” The civil case involves a woman who slipped and fell on a sidewalk during the winter.

For the students there were a few surprises, such as just how quickly the judges interjected during statements, challenging the attorneys’ interpretations.

After each case, the attorneys con-

ducted question-and-answer sessions with the students, discussing law concepts, case particulars and even how to balance a healthy lifestyle with such a demanding profession.

“This is a chance for them to see issues discussed at a very high level,” Winterson said. “This was absolutely invaluable to them.”

Danielle Erickson, a New Hartford resident and senior at the school, is one of the students who not only wants to be an attorney but hopes to qualify for an upcoming Moot (simulated) Court tournament at Duke University.

“It was good to view how it’s done and what to expect,” she said. “This just shows how demanding of a profession it is.”

The visit was part of the Appellate Court’s “On Circuit” program, which since 1996 has brought proceedings to

high schools and law schools, including Litchfield High School in 2004 and Kent School in 2009.

This session, however, was the first time a visit has had such an historic undertone.

Superior Court Judge John A. Danaher III brought the idea to DiPentima, who agreed. The project involved many partners, including the Connecticut Judicial Branch, Litchfield Historical Society and the Litchfield County Bar Association.

Historical Society Director Cathy Fields said it was “gratifying” to see the court in action in such a historic setting.

“It was fabulous,” she said.

Because of the small setting, legal experts also visited Northwestern Regional School No. 7 beforehand so all 25 kids in the class could familiarize themselves with the case and learn about the process.

Regina N. Wexler, a Torrington-based attorney and chair of the Bar Association’s law day committee, said the groups worked hard to also make Thursday a valuable experience.

“We tried to concentrate on the quality of their experience,” she said. “I think the kids were very engaged.”

With the Bantam Superior Court and Litchfield Judicial District Courthouse due to be absorbed into the new courthouse under construction in Torrington, the Bar Association and the Historical Society are also working on many other special events and exhibits, Wexler said. She anticipates that next year’s Law Day celebration in early May, will be the last during which the Litchfield courthouses will be in operation.

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