

# Court in Session



6

## A Day with Tarrant County's Honorary Juror Program

By Maria Sprow



5

Almost every Friday morning, Tarrant County Justice of the Peace Sergio DeLeon hosts area students as honorary guests in his courtroom, allowing them a behind-the-scenes glimpse of his history, his job, his office and his court so that they can have a better understanding of the court system and county government.

"When I'm on the bench during these eviction proceedings, I want to make sure that due process of law is followed, and followed correctly. Nobody can evict someone just by saying 'I don't like you anymore, I want to evict you.' You're going to have to go through the proper procedures and protocols," DeLeon explained to a group of eight students from the Fort Worth Can Academy on the morning of June 5, prior to the beginning of the day's proceedings, which would focus on evictions, adding that most courts aren't exactly as-seen-on-TV via programs like Judge Judy. "I always try to make people feel at ease. These are civil proceedings, they are not





1

1) 9 a.m.: Fort Worth Can Academy students sit in the deliberation room as Tarrant County Justice of the Peace Sergio DeLeon explains the role justice of the peace courts play in the overall justice system. 2) 9:30 a.m.: Students listen in on actual court eviction proceedings as plaintiffs and defendants present their cases to the judge. Though most cases were cut-and-dry nonpayment of rent proceedings, the students did observe one case centered on a possible violation of the lease, in which parties had hired attorneys and presented witnesses. 3) 11:15 a.m.: Students meet with a representative of the constables office, who discussed the constable's duties and how the two offices work together. 4) 11:30 a.m.: Students and teacher Jazmin Luna (right) head to the office of Constable Ruben Garcia, where constable deputies have created an informational display about their duties. 5) 11:45 a.m.: Students head

criminals. But some of these can get pretty touchy. We had a lady last week that broke down crying. She fell on bad times, had hard luck, had no other place to go. But it's important that when I'm on the bench, I can empathize and sympathize with her situation, but I can't be the defendant's friend. I have to follow the law and make sure the plaintiffs have their rights as well. One plaintiff came in here one day with an eviction and he said, 'I can't subsidize their living and mine too.'

The Judge went on to talk about the steps of an eviction, the three branches of government and the importance of voting before the students took their special seats in the court's jury box, ready to see first-hand what a civil court proceeding is really like.

Through his Honorary Juror program, DeLeon also hopes to inspire students to get engaged in their local communities and delve into public service.

DeLeon himself became involved in his local community at an early age. As a teenager growing up in Arkansas, his father convinced him to write a letter to then-Gov. Bill Clinton, who responded and invited the student to shadow him in his office for the day. It would become the first of several visits he and his family shared with the future president and secretary of state, including one in the Oval Office, and DeLeon went on to become the county's youngest elected official after successfully running for the constable's position



2

back to Judge DeLeon's office, where he shares his history and they debrief. 6) Noon: At the end of their visit, students receive a certificate of participation for their work as honorary jurors.



3

when he was just 29 years old. He held that office for more than 10 years before being elected as justice of the peace in 2012.

"When I was constable, I was asked to go to New Orleans to help out with hurricane relief efforts and we got sworn in as Louisiana state troopers, so I've got my trooper badge and my hat," DeLeon told the students while sharing with them the stories behind the photos in his office. ... It's been an interesting career."

Can Academy is a charter school dedicated to helping at-risk youth and students who struggled in traditional school settings. The students said they appreciated their stints as honorary jurors and the role justices of the peace and constables play in preserving the justice system and protecting the public.

"Don't let your youth be a hindrance. You can always achieve whatever it is you want, whether it's law enforcement or any other profession," DeLeon told the students. "We are always in need of good, talented people. ... You know what JPs and constables do now, and these are great professions." \*



4