

Teens Take the Lead

Wake Forest Law Students Help Youth Offenders Find a Second Chance

It might look like business as usual at the Forsyth County Courthouse. Litigants appear before judges. A clerk calls the case names. Bailiffs maintain order.

But look a little closer...

Many of the court personnel are teenagers, and so are the litigants and jurors. Prosecutors and defense counsel are youth or Wake Forest Law students. This is Teen Court.

This simulated court program—a mock-trial-type proceeding that takes place in a courtroom before a jury of teens—is coordinated by the Forsyth County Court to give first-time juvenile offenders an alternative to the juvenile justice system. Defendants in the program already have admitted guilt to non-violent offenses and agree to abide by the ruling of the Teen Court. Instead of juvenile detention, sentences include alternatives like community service, skills and education seminars, tutoring, jury duty for other Teen Court proceedings, and letters of apology.

Teen Court is one of nine standing programs of the Wake Forest Law Pro Bono Project. Through the Pro Bono Project, Wake Forest Law students volunteer their time for pro bono legal projects for low-income and marginalized communities under the supervision of licensed attorneys.

Practical Legal Experience

In addition to prosecution and defense, Wake Forest Law students also serve as clerks of court, administering an oath of confidentiality and handling documents, as well as jury assistants, coordinating jury pools consisting of teens, many of whom are participating as part of their own Teen Court sentences. Law student volunteers are trained on everything from how to conduct defendant interviews to how to deal with upset parents. During the

proceedings, which typically last 20-30 minutes, each side gives opening and closing statements and direct and cross examination.

Wake Forest Law student Daniel Wilkes (JD '24) serves along with Kaylee Tillett (JD '24) and Peyton Mitchell (JD '25) as the current Pro Bono Project coordinators for Teen Court. Wilkes recalls a case in which he defended a girl with special needs. Due to the collaborative nature of the proceeding, Wilkes was able to pause the prosecution's questioning and speak with the girl's mother and the volunteer counsel on the other side about tailoring the cross-examination to accommodate her disability. Everyone involved in the "trial" cared about what the girl was going through, Wilkes says. At the end, there was a "heartfelt moment" when her mother thanked him for his work on the case.

An Alternative to Traditional Juvenile Justice

The Forsyth County Teen Court program is part of a movement of youth-administered "courts" in the United States that began expanding in the 1990s. According to some estimates, more than 1,000 exist today.

Sponsored by the United Way and the YWCA of Winston-Salem & Forsyth County, the Forsyth County program has been in existence for 20 years. In 2022, it heard cases of 80 youth.

A dozen or more Wake Forest Law students generally participate in Teen Court sessions, which take place every other Tuesday. Mitchell says the law students often



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are interested in mentoring teens and doing something good for the community, in addition to gaining litigation experience. She is encouraged when she sees teens in the program who take themselves seriously, “as not kids anymore,” and want to make up for the poor choices that got them into the system in the first place.

Turning Lives Around

According to Forsyth County YWCA documents, its juvenile crime prevention programs—including Teen Court—have reduced recidivism more than 80% over the past 10+ years, but the numbers only tell half the story.

According to the Pro Bono Project web page on Teen Court, the program offers involved youth “the chance to turn their lives around, avoid a future criminal record, and introduce teens to the world of legal advocacy.”

That is well beyond business as usual.

