

# Ridgeland High School students participate in Teen Court

Nov. 5, 2004

Ridgeland High School students on Thursday, Nov. 11, will have a trial run of court proceedings to get ready for Teen Court in January.

A mock trial will be conducted from 8:45 to 9:50 a.m. Nov. 11 in the cafeteria auditorium at Ridgeland High School. Media interested in the program are welcome to attend the mock trial.

When Teen Court begins hearing actual cases in January, those proceedings will be closed to the public.

Teen Court will use peer pressure to hold juveniles accountable for their actions and discourage them from engaging in delinquent acts again, said Madison County Court Judge Cynthia Brewer, who is also a Youth Court judge. Judge Brewer will preside over Teen Court. Students will assume the roles of prosecutors, public defenders, bailiffs and jurors.

About 80 students in government, debate and speech classes and the Air Force Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) at Ridgeland High School are the first to participate in the Teen Court program of the Madison County Youth Court.

Judge Brewer hopes to expand the Teen Court program in 2005 to include peer student participants from Madison Central High School and Canton High School.

Ridgeland High government and economics teacher Jeff Clay, drama and debate teacher Stacy Howell and ROTC instructor Col. James Gecewicz have helped organize the Teen Court program.

Six students from the Mississippi College School of Law are preparing the Ridgeland High students for their roles in the courtroom. Senior law school student Arin Hewes is the Teen Court training coordinator, and five students from the law school's Child Advocacy Program act as trainers and mentors.

Training began Nov. 3. The high school students will spend six hours studying the roles of prosecutors, defense attorneys, bailiffs and jurors before they participate in the mock trial, said Professor Shirley Kennedy, Coordinator of Child Advocacy Programs at the Mississippi College School of Law. Their first actual trial is expected to take place in late January.

The Madison County Youth Court prosecutor will make referrals to Teen Court. Parents or guardians would have to approve before their child could participate in the program.

Juveniles who come under the jurisdiction of the Youth Court may be referred to Teen Court for offenses which include petty theft; shoplifting; disorderly conduct; assault or attempted assault which does not involve a weapon; curfew violations; possession of alcohol, drugs or tobacco; public intoxication; vandalism; resisting arrest; making fake bomb threats; and other circumstances.

Sanctions may include restitution, community service, research papers, stricter curfews, oral or written apologies to victims or, in the case of incidents occurring at school, apologies to school officials. Juveniles whose offenses are handled in Teen Court may later be required to sit as jurors.

Teens will gain hands-on experience in the operation of the judicial system.

Ridgeland High Principal Lee Boozer said, "I hope they get a better understanding of service. I hope they get a better understanding of the judicial system. I think it's going to teach responsibility, leadership, good conduct and service."

Judge Brewer said, "There is a real opportunity for them to make a difference in a civic-minded manner. I hope that they will get a feeling of making a difference in our community by taking on civic responsibility."

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