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FROM: Chambers of the Chief Judge
19th Judicial Circuit
Lake County
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Waukegan, Illinois

18th ANNUAL MOCK TRIAL INVITATIONAL HELD VIA ZOOM

For 16 years, the hallways and courtrooms of the Lake County Courthouse came alive for the Annual Mock Trial Invitational, however, due to COVID mitigation measures and transitioning into a virtual platform, in 2021 and again this year, the competition looked very different for the Judges, volunteers, coaches, and students.

Like many of the attorneys, defendants, and litigants with active cases at the Nineteenth Judicial Circuit, Zoom IDs and passwords were issued to teachers and students to allow them the ability to participate from the comforts of their own homes. Livestreaming links were also provided to non-participants to observe the competition. And rather than an in-person welcome from Chief Judge Mark L. Levitt, and event chairs Circuit Judge Christen Bishop and Circuit Judge Victoria Rossetti, the participants heard directly from the Judge presiding over their case.

The twenty-four high school teams competing against one another included students from Addison Trail High School, Carmel Catholic High School, Chicago Christian High School, College Preparatory School of America, Evanston Township High School, Glenbard South High School, Glenbrook South High School, Highland Park High School, Homewood-Flossmoor Community High School, John Hersey High School, Libertyville High School, Maine South High School, Maine West High School (two teams), Niles West High School, Normal Community West High School, South Elgin High School, Southland College Prep High School, St. Charles East High School, Stevenson High School, Timothy Christian School, University of Chicago Laboratory Schools Whitney M. Young Magnet High School, and York Community High School.

By 8:45 a.m., the students were logged on to their assigned courtrooms to begin their virtual trials. The mock trial selected by the Illinois State Bar Association was entitled, "*James Mercer, a Minor by Cameron Mercer v. Smartt Forensics, Inc.*" The case the students prepared involved James, a minor child and the son of Cameron Mercer, and claimed the minor sustained serious injuries while attending a forensic science camp. When campers participated in an off-campus hike, the group became lost and ended up spending the night on a steep, forested hillside. The injured, James, awoke in a confused state, fell down the hillside, and struck his head resulting in a spinal cord injury, quadriplegia, and a serious concussion with long-term memory impairment. James' father filed a suit arguing that the camp should be liable for the damages that James sustained because the camp was grossly negligent in sending campers on a hike in an unfamiliar location.

The teams tried the case, with the students performing in the roles of attorneys and witnesses. Lake County Judges Luis Berrones, Michael Betar, Rhonda Bruno, Patricia Cornell, Stephen DeRue, Ari Fisz, Reginald Mathews, Jacqueline Melius, Paul Novak, James Simonian, Charles Smith, and George Strickland presided over the trials. Similar to last year, there was only one trial for each team, no scoring, and no awards, however, teams were required to practice, work together, and collaborate before presenting their case virtually. Assistant State's Attorneys, Assistant Public Defenders, and practicing trial attorneys volunteered to evaluate the students on their ability, presentation, and

effectiveness with constructive feedback to help the students and coaches prepare for the State competition that is being held virtually in mid-March.

Nearly two years ago, the Nineteenth Judicial Circuit responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by not pausing or delaying court operations, but by relying on our Judicial Information Support (JIS) team to transition Lake County into a virtual court platform for hearings and trials; Lake County held Illinois' first-ever remote civil jury trial. It is not without the training, support, and technology provided by JIS that the Nineteenth Judicial Circuit has been able to continue to provide access to justice and essential court services in Lake County; JIS was a key driving force behind this successful virtual Invitational.

"Thank you to everyone for their participation in our 18th Annual Mock Trial Invitational. Judge Victoria Rossetti and I brought this event to Lake County in 2004. While we would have loved to have held our traditional program, understanding the health and safety of all involved, hosting our Invitational virtually was again the best option for this year. We continue to be impressed with the students' preparedness and wish them the best of luck as they participate in the upcoming State competition. We look forward to resuming our in-person Invitational in 2023," said Circuit Judge Christen Bishop.

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