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Bowie High School's mock trial team sustains title loss

Group falls one point short from capturing circuit competition title

by David Hill | Special to The Gazette

Bowie High School's mock trial team fell a single point short of becoming the area's top high school mock trial team March 26, losing to St. Mary's Ryken High School after an intense competition at the Prince George's County Courthouse in Upper Marlboro.

It was a disappointing loss for Bowie, having nearly triumphed among 31 teams of Maryland high-schoolers who practice arguing legal cases, acting as attorneys and witnesses. The teams were whittled down to the final two — Bowie as the defense, and St. Mary's Ryken in Leonardtown as the plaintiff — who competed in the Seventh Circuit championship title arguing their cases in a real courtroom, in front of real judges.

To earn their place in the championship, Bowie and St. Mary's Ryken beat out schools competing in the Seventh Circuit, which covers Prince George's, Calvert, Charles and St. Mary's counties, during a series of elimination matches.

Bowie's 14-member team, consisting of six attorneys, six witnesses and two alternates, is coached by Jonathan Keiler, a Bowie High social studies teacher who spent 13 years as a practicing attorney in Bethesda.

"I have a really competitive nature," said Mariam Sahibzada, a Bowie junior who served as an attorney, adding that the team practiced nearly every day during the two-month season.

Bowie resident Chris Masino, a junior who played an attorney, said the team is able to work well with each other and build upon their weaknesses.

After four preliminary matches in February among the 31 teams, the 16 best teams advanced to a single-elimination tournament at the courthouse in March.

Each match involved the same case, a teacher's defamation suit against a student whose online accusations of misconduct cost the teacher his job.

Teams alternated between plaintiff and defendant from match to match.

The state finals will be held April 24.

During the circuit championship, St. Mary's Ryken and Bowie presented their cases for more than two hours, relying on months of preparation that all but eliminated the need for notes or scripts.

At trial's end, a four-judge panel graded the teams, awarding points for the quality of their arguments, examinations and witness performances. When the scores were tabulated, the result was a 52-52 tie.

To decide the match, the judges awarded a single point to St. Mary's Ryken, who they thought gave the

better overall performance. It was the second consecutive circuit title for St. Mary's Ryken.

Bowie finished as circuit runner-up with a 5-3 record.

The judging panel praised both teams.

"Everyone who participated was very polite," said Calvert County District Court Judge E. Gregory Wells. "You all handled yourselves better than many attorneys I've seen."

Despite Bowie High falling short, they're poised for a strong return next year. The team doesn't have any seniors, so all 14 members could compete in the 2009-2010 season.

"These are really some of the best students in the school," Keiler said. "We should be in good shape next year."