

[The Columbia Daily Tribune](#)

Legally speaking

Hickman students ready for national law debate contest.



Photo by [Don Shrubshell](#)

Jordan Occena, left, listens to Jessy Hwang on Tuesday as she reads lines from a mock trial.

By [Jonathon Braden](#)

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Every high school mock-trial team that advances to nationals has about a month to prepare its final case.

Every team, that is, except Hickman High School.

An ice storm postponed the state-level competition scheduled for March 27 through 29 in Kansas City. Once the group of seven seniors won the state competition rescheduled for April 18 and 19, the students had two weeks to formalize arguments and learn an entire new case on top of their regular schoolwork.

“We started the preparation literally probably five minutes after being announced the winner of the state competition,” said the team’s coach, local attorney Brad Lear.

Lear and the students have met all but one day in the last 2½ weeks in preparation for the national mock-trial competition in Atlanta tomorrow and Saturday.

Hickman's team will compete against 41 other U.S. high schools and teams from South Korea, Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands.

As a group, Lear said, they have met for about 60 hours since winning the state competition, not counting the hours the students have independently studied the case.

"They have been really learning the skills of advocacy as opposed to having a plan and learning the plan," said Lear, who is a volunteer coach.

The seven students on the team are Hannah Wigger, Jessy Hwang, Katie Van Doren, Ashok Cutosky, Jordan Occena, Helen Lin and Adithi Velore.

None of them plans to study law in the future, but they've all excelled at debating.

"I like to argue," Jordan said. "It's kind of like a formal argument in the courtroom."

When the group receives a case, they form a theory and arguments. The case to be argued at the national competition involves a former employee dead after an altercation in his old boss's office.

The defense is pleading self-defense. The prosecution says it was murder.

The Hickman seniors have to prepare both sides of the case because they could represent either side. At nationals, they'll find out which side they defend. The group will advance based on how it does in the first round.

Lear said the students have progressed through the regional and state competitions by always changing and refining their arguments.

"We practice how to think on our feet," Jessy said.

As a coach, Lear said, it has been fun to help a group of smart students learn to better argue their points.

"Many of them will be future leaders in their chosen fields, and all are certainly intellectually gifted," Lear said. "All those talents can be lost if they're not able to communicate their knowledge and skills to others who aren't quite so gifted."

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