

# NEW BEDFORD

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## City giving youth court a trial run

### Mock trial showcases new program

By BENJAMIN

Standard Free Press reporter

DARLENE HILL — It was two parts "Night Court" and one part Nickelodeon.

For showcasing two packages of AA batteries, 13-year-old "Jay Kingsman" was sentenced — by a jury of his peers — to serve on three Youth Court juries, do 10 hours of community service, write a letter of apology to the store owner, enroll in the Big Brother program, and apologize and hug his mother.

Last night's Youth Court mock trial at the Southern New England School of Law gave state, city, school and law enforcement officials, and parents a chance to witness the progressive new juvenile justice program in action.

The mock trial chosen from

the Youth Court training manual, the 13-year-old who was with his brother when he stole batteries from a mom-and-pop store, is the type of case Youth Court would hear.

In New Bedford Youth Court, the first in the state, youths 11 to 16 are also recommended to the court by police and court officials and are sanctioned by their peers for infractions they have admittedly committed.

Since beginning on Oct. 24, court organizers said so far the only cases have been referred by the school department.

Court is eventually expected to be held weekly with four to six cases each nightly session.

"This program will help many youngsters. I'm sure, never reach juvenile court, and that's our goal," said School Superintendent

dent Michael Tompco before last night's mock trial.

The School Department is one of many agencies, including the police, the district attorney's office and New Bedford Prevention Partnership, involved in the Youth Court collaboration.

"This is the best partnership we've ever been involved in," Mr. Tompco said.

First-lavars, the court's coordinator from the prevention partnership, said youth volunteers serve on the jury in the courtroom and as the attorneys.

The court does not decide guilt of innocence, she said, only aggravating and mitigating circumstances, and agrees upon a reasonable punishment based on those factors.

She said there are 26 volunteers, mostly high school juniors and seniors, who had to attend aggressive training to be part of the court.

The respondent's parents are also required to participate.

Assistant Attorney General Patricia Melenos, who played the role of the judge during the mock trial, said the 18-hour training consisted of Youth Court procedures, constitutional law, criminal procedures and basic lawyering procedures.

One of the mock trial's defense attorneys, Lee Ann Rudolph, 16, a New Bedford High School junior, said Youth Court is a way to prepare for her future.

"I think it's great because I want to be a defense attorney," she said.

Mrs. Rudolph said the court can also help set youths who may be straying onto the right path.

"Then offenses aren't serious, but in the future they could get serious," she said.

# Teen finds success in service

By JENNIFER COSTA  
Standard Times correspondent

**NEW BEDFORD** — Nina Sousa is not your everyday teenager. This 17-year-old role model has a great passion for working with the youth of New Bedford and making a difference in the lives of others.

Beginning her career in youth-oriented programs, Ms. Sousa was first introduced to the New Bedford Prevention Partnership by taking a criminal justice class at New Bedford High School.

She was asked to be a Youth Court volunteer in a program that allows teenagers to act as lawyers for their peers. The program serves as a juvenile diversion program.

Youth Court led her to becoming an active peer leader with the Prevention Partnership Program.

According to Ms. Sousa, the

program officials offered her a full-time job once they saw her skills. She was recently promoted to prevention specialist.

"Getting a promotion was really great," Ms. Sousa said. "It showed me that they like what I do."

The New Bedford Prevention Partnership works hand in hand with Positive Action Against Chemical Addiction.

According to Ms. Sousa, the Partnership helps 9-through-16-year-olds get on the right track.

"The kids we work with have usually had some type of offense such as fighting or arson and we help straighten them out," she said.

The partnership strives to make a difference within the community by helping to coordinate important youth-based programs.

The Teen Center, in New Bedford's South End, hosts teen

dances and Cookin', a multicultural program that uses cooking to enhance knowledge of different cultures while building basic life skills that the youths will use throughout their lives.

There is also a tutoring program for those who have academic difficulties. After-school programs from 3 to 5 p.m. are also offered weekdays.

There typically are 20 to 30 participants at the after-school programs.

The programs have a 91 percent success rate. The other 9 percent are usually made up of youths that have been dropped from the program due to their failure to fulfill the requirements that have been set for them.

"It is a great feeling to have parents compliment you for doing such a good job with their son or daughter. It makes you feel like you are making a difference in someone's life," Ms.

Sousa said.

Ms. Sousa's favorite aspect of her position remains working with the Youth Court program.

"I enjoy the background information, not just the volunteering aspect," she said. "Youth Court is more of the type of job I want to pursue."

By working with the Partnership Program, Ms. Sousa has been able to appreciate what New Bedford has for resources.

"New Bedford really tries to help the youth. They really try to provide support that will help them succeed. I have come to see my city differently by working where I do and I am proud of it," she said.

Having graduated from New Bedford High School only a couple of weeks ago, Ms. Sousa plans on continuing her education at Anna Maria College in Paxton by studying criminal justice.

## Youth court delivers justice to young offenders

By CARA NISSMAN

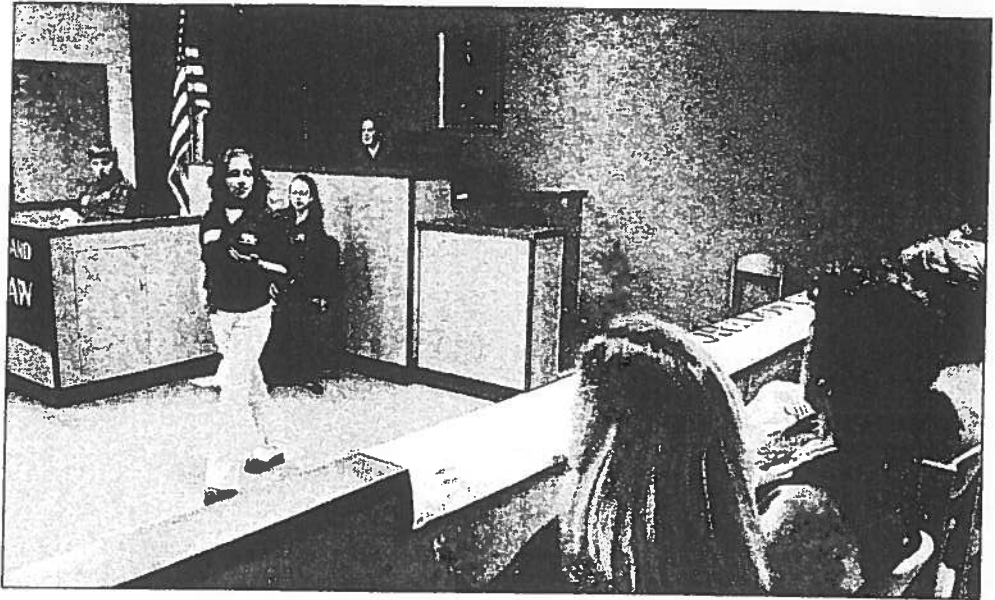
Prosecutor Nina Sousa grilled the meek defendant on the stand, quickly forcing her to admit her guilt.

The accused flagrantly ignored a teacher's pleas to stop blocking an exit during a fire drill while trying to get her friends' attention. Peppered with obscenities, her shouts disrupted the halls and drowned out the principal's safety instructions.

A new episode of a teen-targeted "Law & Order"? (As if there weren't enough spinoffs already!) No, Sousa, 16, a New Bedford High junior, is one of 35 young members of the New Bedford Youth Court, which recently performed a mock demonstration at New Bedford's Southern New England School of Law.

One of nearly 900 similar programs nationwide, the court, which began hearing cases in October, is a voluntary program for mostly first-time offenders of minor crimes, including theft and underage drinking.

# Law and order



STAFF PHOTO BY JOHN WILCOX

**IN SESSION:** Junior Charnee Rose makes an opening statement to the jury in her role as prosecutor.

Referred by a school, police or the juvenile court, defendants — called respondents — ranging in age from 8 to 16, must admit guilt to participate in the program.

"There's restorative justice in having the offender admit guilt,"

said director Lisa Birknes Tavares. "The respondent, parents, teachers and possibly the victim and police officer have to take the stand."

New Bedford high school juniors and seniors act as lawyers, clerks and bailiffs after undergoing an intense training program.

"We have found a really dedicated group of students," said Birknes Tavares. "They go through an excruciating 18 hours of training where they learn how to do openings, closings and cross-examinations. They get a pretty good snapshot of what it's like to be a lawyer."

The jury of six volunteers (ages 12 to 18) hands down sanctions such as community service, public apologies, curfews, grade requirements, tutoring and classes in diversity. Birknes Tavares said the retired judges and attorneys who preside over the hearings rarely alter a jury's verdict.

Despite the court's professionalism, offenders' parents occasionally don't take the proceedings seriously.

"A parent was laughing one time," said Melissa Bento, 17, a Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational Technical High senior. "Some people think it's like a slap on the wrist, but it's not like that."

Most young offenders understand they've received a rare opportunity to make amends without incurring a permanent law on their records. Indeed, kids who participate in youth courts are four times less likely to reoffend than youths tried in the traditional juvenile court system, according to a 2002 national Urban Institute study.

Amanda DeGrace said an acquaintance who had been repeatedly tried in juvenile court has told her he might be living a more lawful life

had the youth court been in session when he first got into trouble.

"He said he would've straightened up his act because the youth court program is more positive," said DeGrace, 17, a New Bedford High junior. "When you go through youth court, you give something back to the community. You can see yourself as a productive citizen."

The program, the first in Massachusetts, also benefits the teens on the other side of the witness stand, many of whom are aspiring lawyers.

Sousa said she has gained confidence in public speaking.

"I used to get nervous," she said. "But I've gotten used to it. I'm on the debate team."

"No wonder all your witnesses cry," chided Charnee Rose, 16, a New Bedford High junior and fellow prosecutor. "One kid on the stand cried and said, 'I'm sorry, Mommy.'"

"You definitely feel bad when they cry," said Sousa. "But you have to realize that you're helping them."

Participants also learn how to rapidly connect with people.

"It can be hard to get (admissions) out of kids," said Jared Booker, 16, a New Bedford High junior. "But the way you portray it can make or break a case."

Although the media sometimes portray court proceedings as a slow process, youth court lawyers only have 20 minutes to prepare a case before the start of a hearing. Rose said she and her peers glean inspiration for how to conduct themselves in court by watching TV shows.

"I used to watch Court TV, 'Law & Order' and 'The Practice' and think, yeah, I could yell at people," she said.

What's up? Tell Cara Nissman at [cniissman@bostonherald.com](mailto:cniissman@bostonherald.com).



STAFF PHOTO BY JOHN WILCOX

**ON TRIAL:** Senior Sarah Angers listens to the judge read charges against her in her role as defendant during a mock trial.

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# In Youth Court, jury of peers will mete out justice

By MATT APUZZO

Standard Times staff writer

It used to be hard to strike a middle ground with discipline in this city.

If a police officer or a teacher let a youth off with a warning they were "enabling" him, or maybe letting him "slip through the cracks."

If they sent him to Juvenile Court, they were forever entering him into the criminal justice system.

But a new youth court at Southern New England School of Law will keep young first-time offenders out of the criminal justice system. Instead, they will be judged by their peers.

It is not juvenile court, so a judgment there does not carry a criminal record, but the New Bedford Youth Court does dole out consequences, such as Police Department boot camp or community service.

"When we do intake into the juvenile system, we gather information about their families, their dates of birth and we put that into a computer system," said Joe Hamilton, chief juvenile probation officer in Bristol County.

"That information remains in the system forever, even if there's never a guilty judgment."

Until last month, Massachusetts was one of only four states in the country without a Youth Court, in which children ages 8 to 16 are prosecuted, defended and sentenced by their peers.

"Being held accountable to your peers can, for a first-time offender, be enough to reach someone who's falling off track,"

said Lisa Tavares, the court coordinator for the New Bedford Prevention Partnership.

Student volunteers will serve as the jurors, the prosecutors and the defense attorneys. An adult, usually a retired judge, will sit as the judge.

"A diversion program gives kids the chance to learn right from wrong," Mr. Hamilton said. "And if they need services, they can get them without a record."

The grant-funded program requires a major commitment from parents, who must be present during Youth Court hearings.

"You have to have one other person holding a young person accountable," Ms. Tavares said. "There has to be a close link between the Youth Court, the referring agency and the parent."

The offenses might not always amount to crimes. For younger children, the offense might be bullying. For older teens it might be truancy or possession of alcohol or tobacco.

But the offense could be as serious as assault or disorderly conduct.

The accused and his parent must agree to abide by the Youth Court judgment. Otherwise, the offense is referred back to the school, police or the courts, where punishment can be more severe.

Organizers will show off the court procedure tonight during an invitation-only open house and mock trial.

## TOWN REPORT: SOUTHCOAST

## Volunteers, perpetrators alike attest to Youth Court's value

By LAUREN DALEY

Standard Times Correspondent

NEW BEDFORD — When Angelica Hilerio got in trouble for fighting, the Normandin Middle School eighth-grader could have simply opted for a school suspension and spent a lazy week watching TV.

"But I wouldn't have learned anything," said Angelica, 15, who voluntarily subjected herself to New Bedford Youth Court, a real court run by high school volunteers who judge youths convicted of crimes.

"I never knew people cared," Angelica said. "I learned something, but on top of that, I was rewarded because I realized so many people care."

New Bedford Youth Court, launched in 2002, is a collaboration of schools, police, courts and youth volunteers.

Student volunteers from New Bedford High School and Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational-Technical High School act as prosecution attorneys and defense attorneys — the volunteers were given scholarships ranging from \$50 to \$600 at a ceremony Tuesday night.

"A lot of students and parents opt for the suspension because it's easier, but Youth Court teaches the (offenders) a life lesson," said Normandin Assistant Principal Desiree Vincent, who suggested Angelica attend the court.

Youths ages 8 to 16 who have been convicted of crimes ranging from minor assault to van-

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their peers and sentenced to anything from community service to writing an essay on why they shouldn't have committed their certain crime.

"On behalf of the DA's office, we see that Youth Court keeps kids out of the legal system," said Eric Pope, an employee at the District Attorney's office and a member of the New Bedford School Committee.

"It helps young people take responsibility," said School Committee member Ramona C. Silva. "Who better to judge you than your peers?"

"It gives the kids a chance to look at what they've done and be held accountable for it," said Terri Swanson, assistant director of Youth Court.

Director Lisa Birknes-Tavares said the program saves young students from "having an early stain on their record."

She said the Youth Court saw 130 cases last year for crimes such as larceny, assault, alcohol violations, shoplifting and disorderly conduct.

derly conduct.

She said the court doesn't help only the youths on trial, but those who volunteer.

"A lot of the volunteers are interested in a career in law, but some just want to give back to the community."

"It helps them develop skills as critical thinkers and as public speakers."

Volunteer Irma Dias, 47, recently graduated from New Bedford High; she will attend Northeastern University in the fall to study criminal justice.

"I like helping kids out, because usually they come back as volunteers themselves," said Ms. Dias, who received a scholarship Tuesday.

"Kids should volunteer because you realize that you can help the community," she said.

Fellow scholarship recipient Katherine Masson, 18, of Acushnet, said, "We've seen kids come back and volunteer to be on the jury, and we know we've made a difference in their lives."