

## *A Field Trip to the California Supreme Court*

BY DEBBIE POLLAK LEVY

When I first mentioned a tour of the California Supreme Court to my English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, two students approached me and said they were already familiar with the courts – because they had watched Judge Judy in action. This was all the motivation I needed to continue planning a field trip.

I wanted to show my students the more somber courtrooms where justice is advanced, however slowly and unevenly, in our society. By sharing with them what goes on in our courthouses, I hoped they would feel more a part of American society and therefore be empowered to contribute more.

The two trips I have taken to the Supreme Court have been well worth the effort. A tour program conducted under the auspices of the Court and supported by the California Supreme Court Historical Society makes these trips as easy as possible for teachers. The Court offers group tours and also distributes teaching materials in advance. The very understandable video and the booklets sent to me meant that integrating the trip into my curriculum was not a difficult task.

Before our trip, I showed the video and gave the students a comprehension worksheet. The students were then given the booklets and made responsible for one section. The students worked in groups to summarize and discuss the material in the booklets. In this way, the preparation allowed the students to gain an understanding of the work of the Court without adding to their already large homework burden. This allowed the tour to be a real treat for the students!

Our guide for the one-hour tour was Thomas Reynolds, a lawyer and a member of the Board of Directors of the Historical Society. He explained the difference between trial and appellate courts – that trial courts are concerned with discerning fact by examining evidence and determining, usually by jury, what happened and who is responsible. The appellate courts, on the other hand, are concerned solely with examining, clarifying, and interpreting the law. No new evidence can be introduced in these courts – very different from the Chinese legal system, for one. Appellate courts are solemn places where logical, written argument rules the day.

As Reynolds spoke, much of what he said sounded like an excerpt from our writing and rhetoric classes. The tour highlighted the value of persuasive academic writing, which is just what we teach. It seemed to validate everything I had been saying all semester.

When we went into the grand courtroom, a three-judge panel of the Court of Appeal was hearing argu-



*A view of the mural in the majestic domed-ceiling courtroom inside the newly renovated California Supreme Court headquarters in San Francisco.*

ments. The Supreme Court shares its courtroom with the Court of Appeal for the First District. Justice Anthony Kline was questioning a lawyer, unpersuaded by her argument because the point she was countering was moot. She needed to address the stronger opposition, Justice Kline kept saying. Later he criticized her for bringing in irrelevant detail. It was right out of our texts – but spoken so well and with such authority. The students not only learned about our legal system, but also were exposed to intelligent American discourse.

Clear thinking and writing are what hold power in these courts. The writing we are teaching sets students, if they persevere, on the road to being able to persuade and prevail in our society. This message was implicit in Reynolds' comments as he told us about both the history and the modern workings of the Court. The cynics may smirk, but we left the courtroom that day feeling the glory of American justice.

The students asked thoughtful questions throughout the tour. At one point we had an interesting discussion about the ethnic makeup of the Supreme Court, currently consisting of three white justices, two Asians, one black and – the most recent addition – one Hispanic. The students were thrilled and moved by the tour, and I left wanting to spend more time working with the vocabulary we were exposed to, the history of the California court system, and forms of argument and counter-argument.

The tour was a wonderful addition to the semester – energizing for me and empowering and eye-opening for the students. I have encouraged my colleagues and others – including teachers at my son's high school – to take a field trip to the Supreme Court.

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*The California Supreme Court Historical Society is proud to support the California Supreme Court tour program. To schedule a tour, call (415)865-7597.*