



Title: Fayette County Teen Court Program

By: Whitney L. Stepp

Since 1997, Bennett Bayer, has presided as judge for the Fayette County Teen Court Program. For the last three years, our very own Whitney Stepp has assisted Bennett as the Fayette County Teen Court Coordinator. For at least a decade it has been a tradition for one of our associates or paralegals to act as Coordinator.

Teen Court is administered by the Administrative Office of the Courts and functions as part of Juvenile Court providing first-time juvenile offenders the opportunity to participate in an alternative process carried out by their peers acting as prosecutor, defense counsel and jurors in an actual trial to determine the disposition of the criminal charges.

What better way to influence a young offender than to put the individual before a jury of his or her peers? Peer pressure in a Teen Court setting can have a more immediate and meaningful effect upon a young defendant than the traditional juvenile justice approach. Based on the premise that most young people want to do what is right when making decisions, even those who may make the wrong choice due to external factors, such as peer pressure, are often guided by the example set by the peers and the opportunity to be treated as a person rather than just another juvenile defendant amongst a courtroom full of others. The message given by a peer jury is not intended as punitive, but is constructive teaching the young offender how to make better decisions. Part of the disposition for each case requires the teen offender to serve as a juror in other cases, allowing them to view mistakes made by others with the lessons long remembered to benefit themselves.

Today, the Teen Court concept operates within 28 Kentucky counties. More than 17,000 students have participated in the program since its inception. The program succeeds as a positive alternative to Juvenile Court by bringing together high school students and members of the legal profession.

