

Junior Judges

helping kids make
smart choices

By Anita Davis

“Are you too young to be judges?” asked Dallas lawyer Karin Crump of fourth grade students at Wakefield Elementary School in Sherman.

“Yes,” answered several students.

“No!” responded Crump to the surprised nine- and 10-year-olds.

“You’re *not* too young to be judges. You can be judges of your own behavior. You can judge what is the right thing to do when you have to make tough choices.”



JUNIOR JUDGES will become a national program in the fall, according to ABA/Young Lawyers Division Chair-Elect Alan Olson. Olson made the announcement at the TYLA board meeting in Laredo on Nov. 2-3.

Olson heard about the program at an ABA/YLD meeting earlier in the year and asked to see the video and manual. "I was blown away," he said, and immediately called TYLA President Amos Mazzant.

"This is only the third Texas program to be taken national," said Mazzant. "And, "Junior Judges" was selected even before we had launched it here in Texas. We are very excited."

Crump and TYLA President Amos Mazzant presented the pilot of TYLA's "Junior Judges" program in mid-October in Sherman. The program, sub-titled "Helping Kids Make Smart Choices," teaches elementary aged children to make good decisions regarding cheating, destroying property, teasing, bullying, stealing, drugs and alcohol, and gangs and weapons. Clever videos introduce each topic, after which the teacher or attorney leads a discussion.

"Younger and younger children are committing crimes," said Mazzant. "This program is aimed at kids who are old enough to know right from wrong, but are probably too young to have committed a crime. We want to stop bad behavior before it starts."

Long before Mazzant was sworn in as TYLA president in June, he talked with educators and lawyers about an elementary school curriculum.

"There was a need in elementary schools for something like 'Crossing the Line' (TYLA's middle-school program about the consequences of bad behavior)," said Mazzant. By May 2001, Mazzant had received a Texas Bar Foundation grant, formed a committee, and enlisted a slew of experts, from his wife, Michelle, who was a kindergarten teacher, to teachers in Houston and Abilene, to staff in the Attorney General's Office, the Texas Youth Commission, and the State Bar Law-Related Education department.

"We came up with 14 topics appropriate for elementary age children, which we narrowed to seven," said Mazzant. "I wanted 'Junior Judges' in the classroom by the fall. It wasn't a question of 'Can we do it?' but 'How can we do it?'"

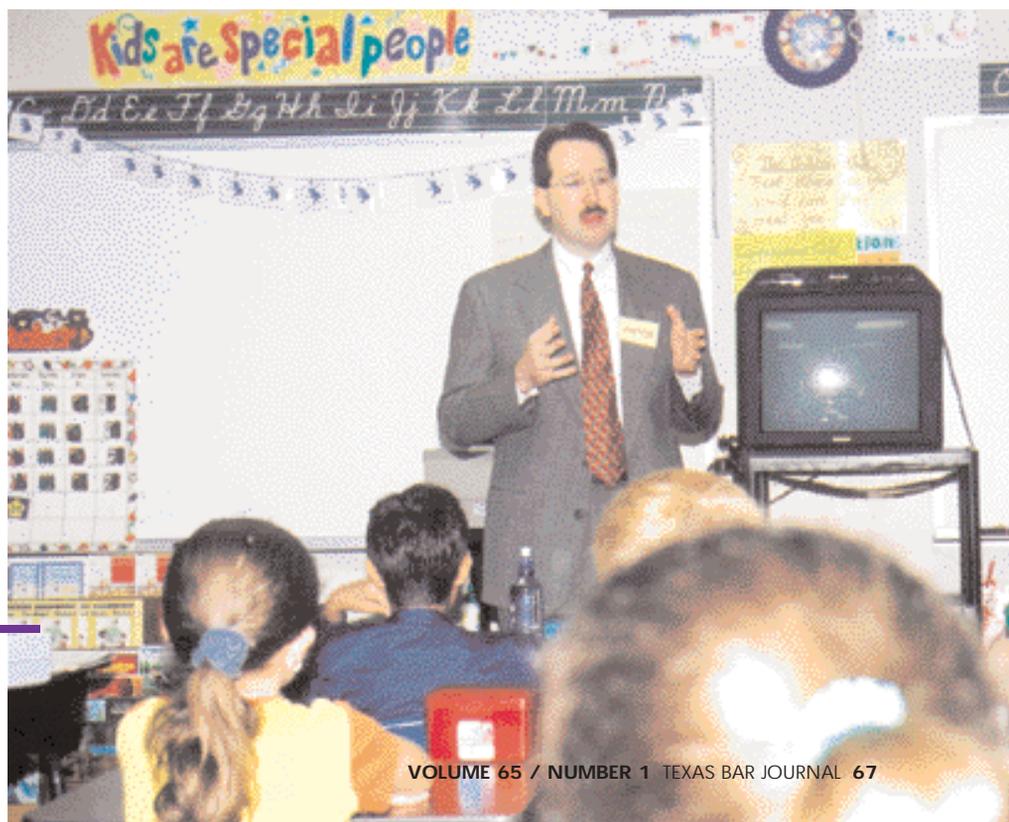
The committee worked furiously all summer. It hired a professional video producer to make the seven-vignette video. Crump wrote the curriculum guide. "I wrote and re-wrote it with a lot of input from the experts," she said.

Finally, on Oct. 8, 6,000 letters were sent to principals of elementary schools announcing the availability of the program. At the same time, Mazzant and Crump took the program to his daughter's elementary school.

"Lawyers and judges work with rules and laws," Mazzant told the students in Brenda Lampe's fourth grade class. "But, rules and laws are good for you, too. They help you make smart choices — like whether or not to cheat on a spelling test."

With that, Mazzant played the video about three boys who had a spelling test they had not studied for because they had watched a basketball game instead. Two of the boys had cheat sheets and were trying to convince the third boy to use one, too.

Mazzant turned off the video and engaged the students in a discussion on why kids cheat, why it is better not to cheat, and what the consequences are if you cheat.



Amos Mazzant launched the Junior Judges program before an enthusiastic audience of fourth graders in Sherman.

JUNIOR JUDGES IN BRIEF

GRADE LEVEL: **fourth**

PURPOSE: teach students to judge for themselves what is the right thing to do in difficult situations

TOPICS: cheating, destroying property, teasing, bullying, stealing, drugs and alcohol, and gangs and weapons

TIME REQUIRED OF VOLUNTEER ATTORNEYS: about one hour (to teach drugs and alcohol, and gangs and weapons units) to four hours (if attorney teaches all units). The classroom teacher can teach any units not taught by an attorney.

TRAINING: TYLA provides the curriculum guide for the attorney/teacher and a video with seven vignettes (to be shown in class).

ADVANCE WORK: minimal. Schools have contacted TYLA and expressed interest; the lawyer needs only to schedule a convenient time with the school, watch the video vignettes, and read the curriculum guide on units he or she is teaching.

REWARDS: tremendous! Students love the videos and relate to the topics. Teachers appreciate this wonderful free program. Attorneys have the satisfaction of helping young children make smart choices.

CONTACT: TYLA office (800) 204-2222, Ext. 6429.

"You get a mark (a demerit) if you cheat," said Enrique. "The more you cheat, the harder it gets when you go to a higher grade," observed Cherise.

"It's cheating if you copy someone else's work from the Internet," added Ryan. And when Mazzant asked what kind of cheating that was, Ryan volunteered, "Plagiarism."

"That's a big word," said Mazzant. "Does anyone know what it means?"

"It's like what Napster did," volunteered Jeffery.

Mazzant showed the next vignette on bullying, and then one about teasing. Mrs. Lampe explained how she deals with her students when they tease each other. "They have to write letters of apology to each other," she said. "The letters are then sent home and the parents sign them."

In the stealing vignette, two girls are at a jewelry counter and one wants a necklace and the other one urges her to "just slip it in your pocket."

During the discussion, Mrs. Lampe said, "If you hang out with kids who are stealing, like at a convenience store where one person puts a candy bar in his pocket, you can all get into trouble when the police are called."

Crump lead the "Junior Judges" program in Jerry Reid's class. The students again watched the videos intently, and again had lots to say during the discussion periods. Crump had the students role-play stealing and bullying, asking the class to be judges of what to do — even as bystanders.

"Lots of kids are not taught in the home what is right and what is wrong," said Crump. "And the teachers don't have time during the school day to do it. This program costs the school nothing. We provide the video and the curriculum guide, and possibly a volunteer attorney to teach the class.

"It's a very flexible program," added Crump. "The teacher can teach one topic a day, or do all of them at once. The advantage of an attorney coming in is that we can discuss the legal consequences of bad behavior, especially about drugs and alcohol, and gangs and weapons."

The curriculum guide includes teaching strategies, vocabulary words, additional activities, and a legal term glossary at the back of the curriculum guide. The video has an introduction and seven five-minute vignettes.

"Many of our TYLA attorneys have young children, and so will relate to this program," said Mazzant. "But it doesn't require you to be a parent to teach the class, nor to be a criminal lawyer. Everything you need is in the curriculum guide. We hope lawyers — young lawyers and not so young lawyers — will sign up to bring this excellent program into elementary school classrooms."

For more information about "Junior Judges," contact the TYLA office at (800)204-2222, Ext. 6429.

LEGAL MALPRACTICE • DISCIPLINARY DEFENSE • DISBARMENT LITIGATION

Your law license merits a team of Attorneys that include Board Certified Specialists and a Former General Counsel of the State Bar of Texas

BOB BENNETT

Board Certified in Consumer Law, Texas Board of Legal Specialization, and Former Prosecutor

and STEVE PETERSON, OF COUNSEL

Former General Counsel of State Bar of Texas

Experience with State Bar Grievance Committee as Assistant General Counsel and First Assistant General Counsel of the State Bar of Texas

Statewide Representation • Over 30 Years of Combined Experience
Disbarment Litigation; Disability Hearings; Board of Law Examiners; State Bar Licensing
Cases handled throughout Texas

Call for brochure on Grievance & Disbarment Matters

THE BENNETT LAW FIRM, P.C.

515 Louisiana, Suite 200 • Houston, Texas 77002 • Telephone: (713) 225-6000 • Facsimile: (713) 225-6001
bbennett@bennettlawfirm.com