Criminal Mock Trial Competition Gives Local Students Unique Court Experience

_By Napa County District Attorney’s Staff_

The Napa District Attorney’s Office is proud to highlight some local students who competed in High School Criminal Mock Trials on behalf of Napa, Sonoma, and Solano counties earlier this year.

Each year local high school teams compete in a regional competition in order to qualify for an invitation to the state finals. The Napa Superior Court graciously donates use of its courtrooms after hours during the competition season.

This year’s competition took place over a six-week period during February and March. Deputy District Attorney Shashawnya Worley volunteers her time to serve as the regional coordinator for the program which entails countless hours reviewing materials, coordinating scheduling, finding volunteers, and making sure each competition night runs smoothly.

As part of the competition students are assigned to specific courtroom roles including the prosecutor, defense attorney, bailiff, courtroom clerk, or testifying...
Like most of our counterparts in neighboring counties and throughout the state, our office paid close attention to updates regarding the state budget. When Governor Newsom’s Office released the revised state budget in early May we were dismayed to learn that it would not contain adequate funding for victim services programs in California.

Providing local victims with the breadth of services we offer is a crucial aspect of the work we do on behalf of the People and our office stands to lose approximately $30,000 in state funding that we use to provide emergency services to victims of crime – everything from emergency housing for victims to petty cash they can use to take care of their immediate needs.

The services our office provides, along with those provided by our community partners such as NEWS, are vital to the healing process of victims of crime in Napa County and it’s shameful that the budget does not provide the necessary funding our programs require to keep things moving smoothly.

As much of a reduction to our funding the budget will toll, we will continue providing crucial services to victims of crime in Napa, but it may be on a smaller scale. It’s up to us find a way, but luckily we live and work in an extremely generous community who help us at every step of the way. We also have a staff of dedicated victim advocates who work tirelessly to help victims of crime in Napa County.

Indeed we are lucky in Napa County, but what about the programs in our community who may have to decrease the number of safe houses they operate, financial assistance they provide to victims, mental health sessions they facilitate, staffing levels, or the closure of their programs entirely?

It’s the victims of crime who will suffer the most when this happens and we stand in solidarity with them and our colleagues.
Students from a variety of local schools got a sense of how a criminal prosecution is handled in Napa County during a Criminal Mock Trial Competition held at the Napa County Superior Court February and March. Photos: Courtesy

Following the close of the 2024 competition season, graduating seniors from the Justin-Siena Mock Trial program reflected on their experience stating the program is empowering to students, allowing them to improve their public speaking, critical thinking, and collaboration skills.

This season Deputy District Attorney Brittney Murray served as the volunteer attorney coach for the Napa High School team. This was the first time Napa High School has competed in competition since before COVID. In addition to being present on competition nights, Ms. Murray spent time after work attending team practices and teaching her students how to present their case. Ms. Murray found her role as an attorney coach extremely rewarding and saw immense growth in her students throughout the competition.

Several other esteemed members of our local legal community also volunteered their time to fill roles as the mock presiding judge or as presentation scorers. The volunteers included local judges and commissioners from both the Napa and Sonoma Judiciary, six other Deputy District Attorneys from the Napa District Attorney’s Office, as well as several local private counsel. Deputy District Attorney Amy Bailey stated she was very impressed by the level of preparation that went into getting ready for trial as well as the quality of the students’ presentations. Many students presented at a level far beyond what was expected of high school litigants with no legal training.

Following each round of competition, the volunteer judges and scorers provided insight, advice, and critique to the students. The mock trial faculty advisor for MIT Academy in Vallejo stated the feedback her students received during the local competition helped their team master courtroom procedures, case strategies, evidence submission rules, and courtroom etiquette prior to the state finals.

Ultimately, teams from Justin-Siena High School, Sonoma Valley High School, and MIT Academy went on to represent their respective counties at the state finals.

We are extremely proud of the work all these students put into the program and encourage them to consider a future career in the legal field.
FBI Supervisory Special Agent Ann Hawkins (left) and Napa County District Attorney Allison Haley speak to a crowd of roughly 120 individuals who gathered at Embassy Suites of Napa, Tuesday April 30, 2024, regarding the issue of sextortion during Monarch Justice Center’s 2024 Human Trafficking Conference. Photo: Carlos Villatoro

**By Carlos Villatoro**

**Public Affairs and Media Officer**

While most teenagers typically worry about where to hang out with friends, what to have for lunch, or their grades, Nola Brantley worried about surviving.

Extreme poverty, a lack of supervision, and the absence of any love in her home led her to a man who would eventually force her to become a victim of human trafficking, she said.

On Tuesday, April 30, Nola shared her story with a group 120 or more individuals who gathered at Embassy Suites of Napa for the first-ever Human Trafficking Seminar hosted by the Monarch Justice Center. Nola told the group of mostly women about her troubled childhood and harrowing experience as a victim of human trafficking, and how she would leave that life to become an advocate for victims of human trafficking.

“My journey from victim to survivor has been marked by pain, trauma and challenges, but has also been defined by courage, strength and the unwavering belief in the possibility of a better future,” she told the group.

The man, who was 20 years her senior, began sexually abusing Nola at the age of 15, she said.

continues on page 5
“He started by sexually abusing me and convincing me that what we had was a relationship, despite the stark age gap of 20 years between us,” she said. “He wove a web of deceit and control around me, isolated me from my family, and moved me away from everything familiar. I found myself depending on him for my most basic needs. Trapped in a cycle of abuse that escalated from sexual exploitation to the horrors of commercial sexual exploitation. In the depths of my despair, I was poor and desperate for love and attention, willing to endure unspeakable pain in exchange for fleeting moments of false affection.”

After several years, Nola would eventually break free from the cycle of human trafficking by tapping into the spark of defiance within her, she said.

“With each passing day, I found the strength to reclaim my voice, to defy the chains that bound me, and to envision a future beyond the confines of my trauma,” she said.

Nola has made it her life’s work to combat human trafficking and help its victims through her many speaking engagements and trainings she conducts throughout the state under her Nola Brantley Speaks brand. In 2007, she co-founded and served as the Executive Director of Misssey, an Alameda County-based nonprofit organization that works to prevent youths from entering circumstances of sexual exploitation and violence.

Nola served as the event’s keynote speaker and was joined by several local people dedicated to helping victims of human trafficking and bringing traffickers to justice. Among them was Kari Cordero, executive director of Napa Solano SANE-SART, who highlighted her agency’s efforts to combat human trafficking, which began two years ago after her team performed sexual assault forensic examinations on two women who were brutally murdered, she said.

“We have two exam teams at Napa Solano SANE-SART, we do sexual assault forensic examinations, a few years ago we did two exams on two women who were brutally murdered,” she told the crowd. “When I started to research (resources for victims of human trafficking), I found that there was a huge gap in services. Me and my crazy ideas kind of forced our team to start working directly with human trafficking victims.”

The SANE-SART team set a goal of assisting 20 victims of human trafficking during the first year of working with them, but ended up helping 40 victims, she said. That amount increased to 51 victims in year two. Of the victims SANE-SART worked with, they found that 60 percent were between 18-24 years old and 75 percent of the victims were in foster care or have lost a parent.
continued from page 5

Erin Harper, the Napa County District Attorney’s Victim Witness Program Manager, spoke of her experience as a 14-year veteran of the children’s advocacy center (CAC) in Alameda County known as Calico and talked about the many services provided through Napa’s own CAC - the Courage Center.

“CACs have evolved beyond just doing (multidisciplinary) interviews,” she said. “They now do support work for whoever the protective adult is taking care of that child and the other main service that I want to talk about today is that they do case reviews. The idea is not to achieve just justice for the child, but healing as well.”

Napa County District Attorney Allison Haley teamed up with Federal Bureau of Investigations Supervisory Special Agent Ann Hawkins to talk to the group about the blight of sextortion - defined as a crime in which people adopt fake online identities to coerce victims to send nude photos and videos of themselves in an attempt to get the victim to pay money, gift cards, or other items of monetary value in exchange for a promise not to post the content.

“We have started to get some cases at the District Attorney’s Office that were starting to be more and more concerning to me,” DA Haley said. “Kids are showing up on the internet they are playing videogames or they are on social media platforms and they are being approached. And they are trading those kind of images and so forth, and that kind of relationship is developing.”

“The people who perpetrate this are pros at what they do, they are masters at manipulation,” added Hawkins. “We see both males and females being exploited, but just differently.”

A panel discussion regarding the collaborative approach Napa County takes when prosecuting human trafficking cases featuring the DA’s Victim Witness Program Manager Erin Harper, Chief Deputy District Attorney Taryn Hunter, SAVS Program Director Christina Gomez, and Napa Solano SANE-SART Victims Services Director Melissa Nickson punctuated the Human Trafficking Conference and prompted a variety of questions from the audience.
Out & About

SHEA, KIM AND ALLISON @ HUMAN TRAFFICKING SEMINAR 4/30/2024

CONSENT, BOUNDARIES, GROOMING AND ONLINE SAFETY TALK @ACHS 5/7/2024

LAW OF CONSENT TALK @ JUSTIN-SIENA HIGH SCHOOL 5/13/2024

HANGING WITH WATSONVILLE PD @PLECET 5/4/2024

Photo credits: Carlos Villatoro, courtesy and NEWS
People V. Mauricio Ramirez Aguilar

A Napa County Superior Court jury convicted Mauricio Ramirez Aguilar, age 40, of second-degree murder and gross vehicular manslaughter while intoxicated in connection with a traffic collision that took the life of Constantine Tsavalas, age 87, of Yountville.

The jury's verdict came after a 12-day trial in which Napa County Deputy District Attorneys Katie Susemihl and Kayla Richeson presented the case on behalf of the People against the defendant.

In addition to the above-mentioned charges, Napa County Superior Court Judge Elia Ortiz found true the special allegation of prior convictions of DUI and found that Aguilar was in violation of probation.

The wreck that resulted in Mr. Tsavalas’ death occurred at 3 p.m., Oct. 17, 2020, at the intersection of Highway 29 and Hoffman Lane. The defendant was driving a white pickup truck southbound along Highway 29 at a high rate of speed when he collided with a Nissan pathfinder driven by the victim who was entering the highway from Hoffman Lane.

A subsequent investigation determined that Aguilar had a blood alcohol content of .204 percent, nearly three times the legal limit of .08 percent, and drove at speeds of 86 miles per hour or more at the time of the wreck.

Prior to the October 2020 incident, the defendant was twice convicted of DUI – both incidents involved vehicle wrecks. In 2008, Aguilar hit a car parked along Kansas Avenue in Napa and it was determined that his blood alcohol content was over the legal limit of .08 percent.

The second DUI occurred on January 27, 2019, when Aguilar drove into a power pole, which set his vehicle on fire, in front of the California Highway Patrol office on Golden Gate Drive. After Napa firefighters extinguished the fire and extricated an unconscious Aguilar from the wreckage it was determined that he was DUI. Aguilar sustained serious injuries during the collision.

During each of the sentencings tied to the two prior DUI convictions, Aguilar was given a Watson Admonition, a warning given to a person who is convicted of DUI informing them that being under the influence of drugs of alcohol, or both, impairs their ability to safely operate a motor vehicle.
The admonitions further stated that it is extremely dangerous to human life to drive while under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or both, and they can be charged with murder if they kill someone while doing so.

The Honorable Judge Ortiz referred Aguilar to the Napa County Probation Department for a presentencing report and the matter is due back in court for sentencing on June 12, 2024, 8:30 a.m., in Department 4 of the Napa County Superior Court.

**People V. Nicholas Scott Boenzi**

A Napa County Superior Court jury convicted Nicholas Scott Boenzi, age 40, of solicitation of prostitution.

The jury’s decision came after a two-day trial in which Deputy District Attorney Lauren Kownacki presented the case on behalf of the People against the defendant.

Boenzi was found guilty of attempting to arrange sex with an undercover officer for $250. When he showed up to the local hotel expecting to meet a prostitute, a Napa County Special Investigations Bureau (NSIB) officer greeted him and placed him under arrest for the crime he was convicted of.

The arrest that led to Boenzi’s conviction was secured through an NSIB human trafficking sting designed to reduce the demand for prostitution in Napa County.

Boenzi was sentenced to summary probation for a period of a year, 15 days in jail, and ordered to complete a John Prevention Course. He is ordered to pay a fine of $500 and the restitution amount of $150. In addition, he is ordered to remand to the Napa County Department of Corrections on June 28, 2024, at 8 a.m., to begin serving his jail sentence.

**People V. Orlando Domingo Montero**

Orlando Domingo Montero, age 44, is charged with contact with minor for sexual offense - prior conviction, and sending harmful matter to a minor.

He is additionally charged with the special allegations of a prior strike conviction of lewd or lascivious acts with a minor under 14 years or age, a prior conviction of having contact with a minor for a sexual purpose, increasing seriousness of priors, and prior prison term.

Montero is due in court for a readiness conference on June 5, 2024, 1:30 p.m., in Department 1 of the Napa County Superior Court. The case against Montero is being prosecuted by Napa County Deputy District Attorney Kristen Orlando, with DA Investigator Rachel Cardin assisting.

**People V. Santos Lopez**

Santos Lopez, age 28, is charged with possession for sale of a controlled substance, sale/transportation/offer to sell a controlled substance, and transport for sale/non-contiguous county.

He is additionally charged with the special allegations of punishment by quantity (substance in above charged crimes exceeded one kilogram); planning sophistication, professionalism; and large quantity of contraband. Lopez last appeared in court on May 28, 2024, for an arraignment hearing in which he entered a plea of not guilty to the charges and a denial of the special allegations. He is due in court for a readiness conference on July 10, 2024, at 1:30 p.m., in Department 1 of the Napa County Superior Court. Deputy District Attorney Ian McNear is prosecuting the case against Mr. Lopez.
People V. Jose Carlos Rivera-Torres

Jose Carlos Rivera-Torres was found to be in violation of his Napa County probation after a hearing on May 16, 2024. The Napa County District Attorney’s Office had filed a petition to revoke the probation of the defendant, who was placed on felony domestic violence probation in 2023.

Rivera-Torres, age 34, was accused of violating his probation for failing to obey all laws by inflicting corporal injury to a domestic partner and violating a domestic violence protective order. The defendant was previously acquitted of the domestic violence charge, but convicted of three counts of violation of a protective order on January 26, 2024, by a Contra Costa County jury. At the May 16 hearing, the Napa Superior Court found the defendant in violation based on the domestic violence conduct as well as the restraining order violations.

On March 1, 2023, the defendant was placed three years' probation in Napa County in connection with a conviction for an incident of domestic violence that occurred in American Canyon on December 30, 2021.

Rivera-Torres is ordered to appear on June 3, 2024, at 8:30 a.m., in Department 3, of the Napa County Superior Court for a violation of probation sentencing. The case is being handled by Deputy District Attorney Agnes Dziadur.

People V. Thomas Hatton McDonald

A Napa County Superior Court Jury convicted Thomas (Tommi) Hatton McDonald (Ms. McDonald is a transgender woman), age 64, of indecent exposure in connection with an incident that occurred October 21, 2021. The jury’s decision came after a three-day trial in which Deputy District Attorney Erik Lawrence presented the case on behalf of the People.

McDonald was found guilty of exposing her genitalia to a woman and her two young daughters who went to her American Canyon home to do some house cleaning work. Napa County Superior Court Judge Francisca Tisher referred the case over to the Napa County Probation Department for a pre-sentencing report.

The defendant is due back in court on June 20, 2024, 8:30 a.m., in Department 1 of the Napa County Superior Court for a sentencing hearing.

People V. Rudi Thompson Rose

A Napa County Superior Court Jury convicted Rudi Thompson Rose, age 48, of driving under the influence of alcohol, driving with .08 percent or higher blood alcohol, and the special allegation of blood alcohol concentration of .15 percent or more. Deputy District Attorney Lisa Sharkey presented the case on behalf of the People during the three-day jury trial. The jury found the defendant guilty of being extremely intoxicated when he drove to Valley Liquor at Highway 121 and Vichy Avenue on the evening of July 19, 2023, to purchase more liquor. The jury’s decision marks the defendant’s 5th DUI conviction.

Napa County Superior Court Judge Raoul Thorbourne sentenced the defendant to four years’ probation, 90 days in jail, and ordered him to pay a fine of $1,980 and a restitution fine of $150. Rose is ordered to remand into custody of the Napa County Department of Corrections on September 30, 2024, to begin his jail sentence. He is also ordered to install an Ignition Interlock Device for two years, not consume any alcohol, complete an 18-month DUI program and stay away from Valley Liquor.
STOP SCAMS BEFORE IT’S TOO LATE

S.A.F.E. (SENIORS AGAINST FINANCIAL EXPLOITATION) INVITES YOU TO A FREE WORKSHOP
DESIGNED TO HELP SENIORS PROTECT THEMSELVES FROM COMMON SCAMS AND OTHER FORMS OF FINANCIAL ABUSE

Friday June 28 | 9:00am – Noon
St. Helena Performing Arts Center
1401 Grayson Avenue, St. Helena
For more information, write Events@mollysangels.com

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH: