

“It’s in My Head”

At the Dirksen Courthouse, Students See a Future in Law

On the final day of Just The Beginning’s Summer Legal Institute, Chicago-area students stepped inside a federal courtroom, questioned a judge and began to see how their own interests could become careers in law.



Students in the Summer Legal Institute in the ceremonial courtroom, with Judge Sara L. Eillis, at the Dirksen Federal Courthouse in Chicago.

CHICAGO — The train ride from Cary to downtown Chicago takes roughly 90 minutes, but for Lylah McNeilley, the destination offered a glimpse of a future she has long imagined.

McNeilley, a student at Cary-Grove High School, wants to become a lawyer. On the final day of Just The Beginning (JTB) — A Pipeline Organization’s Summer Legal Institute, she sat inside the Dirksen Federal Courthouse and listened as U.S. District Judge Sara L. Ellis described her journey from public defender to federal judge.

“I thought it was very inspiring because I also want to be a public defender,” McNeilley said. “I think it’s interesting to learn how she went from a public defender to a judge, and just the process and her daily life.”

Then came a question McNeilley had not necessarily expected to be considering on this day: Could she someday see herself becoming a judge?

“Yes, it is,” she said, after some thought, “It’s in my head.”

Opening the Courthouse

The institute, known as SLI, is JTB's cornerstone youth program for students in grades nine through 12. JTB says it has spent more than 30 years nurturing interest in law among young people from backgrounds historically underrepresented in the profession. Its programs are free, and the one-week institute combines access to judges and attorneys with activities intended to strengthen reading, writing, critical thinking, professional etiquette, financial literacy and public speaking.

The 2026 Chicago institute ran July 20 through 24. During the week, students met legal professionals, explored different practice areas and worked with attorneys to prepare oral arguments based on a case study. They reviewed precedent and legal rules, organized their positions and learned to present them persuasively.

On the final morning, students delivered those arguments at DePaul University College of Law. They then walked to the Dirksen Courthouse, where the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois welcomed them for an afternoon devoted to the judiciary and legal careers.



U.S. District Judge Sara L. Ellis speaks with Summer Legal Institute students in the ceremonial courtroom at the Dirksen U.S. Courthouse.

Lauren Thiel, the court's public services administrator, welcomed the group before Ellis led a "Journey to the Judiciary" conversation. Students asked what Ellis does from day to day, what kinds of cases she handles, why she wanted to become a judge and how her career brought her to the federal bench.

Journey to the Judiciary



Judge Sara L. Ellis answers students' questions about her path to the bench and the work of a federal judge.

Ellis had a concise assessment of their questions.

"They were excellent," she said.

Ellis said speaking with students serves a larger public purpose by making the courts more understandable and the courthouse itself less intimidating.

"I love talking to students because you get to explain how the court system works," Ellis said. "It also opens up the courthouse to them because this is the people's space and their courthouse, so they're encouraged then to come back and see how our legal system works."

That sense of welcome also reflects the Northern District of Illinois' broader outreach efforts, which invite students and educators to engage directly with the courts, the Constitution and the rule of law.

"Opening the courthouse to students is one of the most meaningful ways we can make the judiciary more understandable and accessible," Chief Judge Virginia M. Kendall said. "When young people can sit in a federal courtroom, speak directly with a judge and see the many paths into the legal profession, they begin to recognize that this is their courthouse and that there is a place for them in the law."

JTB relies on judges, lawyers and other legal professionals to share their experiences, mentor students and support their growth.

Finding a Path



Arianna Castillo, left, and Lylah McNeilley, center, join other students from across the Northern District of Illinois.

For Arianna Castillo, a rising senior at Lane Tech, those varied stories are what made the Summer Legal Institute worth attending a second time.

“The people are different and the stories are different,” Castillo said. “I just love hearing everyone’s really unique path to the law field.”

Castillo began with an interest in criminal defense and a desire to help people. Through the institute, she discovered areas of practice she had not known existed and began thinking about how the law might intersect with her experience as an actor.

“I’ve always been an actor, and I really want to help people in the theater sphere get the things that they deserve and be treated the way that they deserve to be treated,” she said.

She now imagines a future in intellectual property or entertainment law, advocating for performers.

Castillo also described the work behind the students’ oral arguments.

“We were given a case study, and we were told, ‘Here are the precedent rules, and here are the legal rules that you’re allowed to use,’” she said. “We crafted them alongside lawyers.”

Assistant U.S. Attorney Kartik Raman then led a “Life of a Lawyer” session, giving students another perspective on public service and the day-to-day work of an attorney.

For McNeilley, Ellis’ story expanded the goal of becoming a public defender into the possibility of one day serving on the bench. For Castillo, a second summer of meeting legal professionals connected her commitment to helping others with her passion for performance.

“I had a minor interest in it,” Castillo said, “but after doing this program not once but twice, it has just made me completely for sure that I want to go into the legal field.”

The Northern District helped give those ambitions a real setting: a federal courtroom, an open conversation with a judge and a courthouse in which the students were welcomed not simply as visitors, but as members of the public invited to learn, ask questions and imagine returning one day as lawyers — or judges — themselves.