

Court Information Release



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Judges offer personal reflections, advice to CPS high schoolers in Courtroom as Classroom Program

Today the U.S. District Court from the Northern District of Illinois hosted a “Courtroom as Classroom” program for over 80 Chicago Public Schools high schoolers from Jones College Prep High School and Al Raby High School of Chicago Public Schools. A panel comprised of judges, federal law enforcement officers, assistant U.S. attorneys, a federal defender, and law clerks spoke about their work in the federal justice system, answered questions, and then shared an informal discussion with students over a pizza lunch.

Panelists shared general information about the federal courts and also reflected on their own lives and career paths, highlighting obstacles they had overcome and the importance of seizing opportunities, believing in oneself, taking risks, and seeking help from mentors.

“How did I become a judge? Sometimes I ask myself the same question,” said Chief Judge Rubén Castillo as he reflected upon his own background, which began on Chicago’s West Side. Emphasizing that judges are everyday people from diverse backgrounds, he shared that though his parents, his mother from a mountaintop village in Puerto Rico and his father from a small town in Mexico, valued education, they had little formal education themselves.

Judge Sharon Johnson Coleman talked about knowing at age 13 that she wanted become a judge when she saw a photograph of a woman wearing a judge’s gown in a book. “My parents always focused on education, but we didn’t know any lawyers or judges,” said Judge Coleman. “Things can happen if you want them to,” she added.

Presiding Magistrate Judge Maria Valdez, who grew up in Los Angeles in a family that struggled to make ends meet, reflected on how her first encounter with the justice system was as a child when members of her family were arrested, and she accompanied her family when they went to make bond. “That was the moment I knew I wanted to become a lawyer,” said Judge Valdez.

“This is one of the best field trips we’ve had. I liked hearing about the speakers’ backgrounds and personal experiences, especially how they each took different paths to get where they are today,” said Kennedy Mitchell, a senior at Jones College Prep.

For Al Raby High School sophomore, Breone Stoudemire, what was most poignant was hearing that not all of the panelists “had the best of grades and people told them couldn’t become what they are today. They were able to persevere to become who they are today,” he said.

Program speakers included the following: U.S. District Chief Judge Rubén Castillo; U.S. District Judge Sharon Johnson Coleman; Presiding Magistrate Judge Maria Valdez; Belkis L. Sandoval, Supervisory Deputy U.S. Marshal; Brian R. Driver, U.S. Supervisory Probation Officer; Vicki L. Kindred Meredith, U.S. Deputy Chief Pretrial Officer; Sergio Rodriguez, Federal Defender Program Staff Attorney; Nathalina Hudson, Assistant U.S. Attorney; Jimmy Arce, Assistant U.S. Attorney; Paul Bateman, Law Clerk; and Tyler Neal, Law Clerk.

The “Courtroom as Classroom” program is an initiative of the District Court’s Community Outreach Program, which is designed to provide the public a better understanding of the federal courts. More information about the court’s outreach program can be found [here](#).

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