

Trumbull team prepares for mock trial

By Susan Silvers
STAFF WRITER

TRUMBULL — Fledgling lawyer Richard Shi is trying to pin the damage for a fire that seriously injured his client on the owner of the property, Pat Cartwright.

“Jamie Franklyn’s life is ruined,” he says in his opening statement, referring to the teen who suffered serious burns in the incident. “He will probably be on crutches for the rest of his life.”

In the trial that will ensue, it’s Shi’s job to elicit the testimony that will prove Franklyn’s case. Or maybe he’ll switch roles to the defense side and prove that it is not Cartwright who bears full responsibility, but with two teens who have already settled with Franklyn for his injuries.

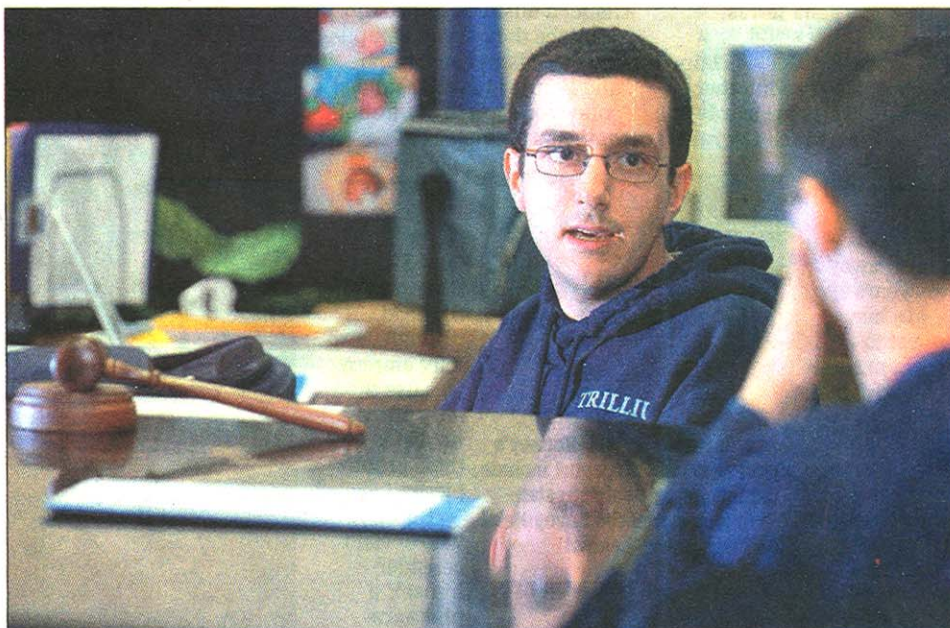
Because none of it actually happened.

Shi and 14 other Trumbull High School students in Eric August’s honors class in Justice and Law are preparing for a mock trial sponsored by the Connecticut Consortium for Law & Citizenship Education, a nonprofit organization.

The two Trumbull teams from August’s class will head to Stamford for a regional competition Friday, when they won’t face off against each other but could compete against several combined teams from Valley high schools, Fairfield College Preparatory School, Stamford High School or Greenwich High School.

“I’ve learned to be a better public speaker,” said Shi, a senior who is an actual prospective lawyer, speaking of the byproduct of his experiences with the program, which is required for the honors class students.

Another prospective lawyer, Paul Basel, said he’s gotten that and more. “I’ve gotten a better feel for courtroom procedure,” he said.



AUTUMN DRISCOLL/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Ben Woessner, a Trumbull High School junior, undergoes cross-examination Thursday during a practice session with the school’s honors mock trial team in preparation for an upcoming competition in Stamford.

Since January, the students have been meeting weekly after school to hone their legal knowledge and skills. They have pored over witness statements, written opening and closing statements for both sides, and prepared lists of questions intended to get the answers and reactions they want from witnesses, in hopes the judges — actual lawyers and jurists — will award them victory and send them on to the next round.

The Stamford event, which runs from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and is open to viewing by non-competitors, is one of many regional mock trials in the next couple of weeks. Others take place in New Haven, New London, Manchester, Middletown, Waterbury and Danbury.

Among the competing high schools are St. Joseph, Joel Barlow, Ridgefield, Westhill, Harding, Bethel and New Milford. Last year, more than 700 students from 52 state high schools participated in the competition, which culminates in May

finals in Hartford.

The competition represents a return after several years absence for Trumbull. August, who might be described as a recovering attorney, encouraged participation after his arrival to the school last fall.

August, a 33-year-old who grew up in Stratford, graduated from New England Law School and spent several years of handling divorce and criminal defense cases before he decided it wasn’t the career for him. He tagged with a Greenwich teacher he knew for a day. “I went to two of his classes,” he said, and the result was that “I knew where I wanted to be.”

He student taught and spent a year at Joel Barlow High School in Easton before joining the THS faculty.

And he was back in legal mode during last week’s practices. Right after Shi, acting as defense lawyer, questioned Cartwright about what he knew about the circumstances of the fire, August launched into an aggressive cross-exami-

nation. He used Cartwright’s statements in an attempt to turn his responses into evidence that would ultimately be used against him.

“Mr. August is really dynamic,” said Sahtia Rivers, a junior, adding that she’s long been interested in a legal career and was grateful for the opportunity to check it out.

But it could also be a way for someone to learn that maybe a legal career isn’t a good choice.

Evan Minkin, a senior, said he’d decided on a medical career as a result, contending that the law is “a lot of work.”

Anne Hogan, a junior who was planning a career as a chiropractor anyway, said she’s enjoyed the class, though it has nothing to do with her chosen profession.

“It’s something we can always use,” she said of the skills in framing an argument and public speaking. But besides that, she said, “we’ve really gotten close as a class.”