

D.A. for a Month?

By Aukjen T. Ingraham, Cosgrave Vergeer Kester.

We have all seen the articles mourning the loss of jury trial experience for newer attorneys. Lawyers are trying fewer cases than in times past, even as law schools are producing more graduates than ever. To help get would-be litigators in the court room, the American College of Trial Lawyers - spearheaded by Wally Sweek of Cosgrave Vergeer Kester and Dan Skerritt of Tonkon Torp - launched the Jury Trial Experience Project.



The program operates like this: civil lawyers are placed either with the Multnomah County District Attorney's Office or with one of several Multnomah County public defender firms. I was the first lawyer to participate in the D.A.'s office - the guinea pig, so to speak. In contrast to the former D.A.-For-A-Day program, I spent an entire month working Monday through Thursday in the D.A.'s office. (The public defender program operates a little bit differently. As I understand it, civil lawyers commit to work one day a week for six months. They are assigned new cases that they see through to sentencing.)

It worked very well.

How many jury trials did I have? One, but not for lack of effort. I was assigned and prepared over 14 cases, most of which ended in pleas. In addition to the jury trial, I prosecuted two bench trials. When I wasn't in trial, I made countless appearances for motions, pleas, probation violations, sentencing and more.

Was it worth it? Absolutely. The jury trial, my first, was an incomparable experience. I was lucky enough to receive feedback from opposing counsel (Matt Donohue of Markowitz Herbold, my civil lawyer counterpart working with Metropolitan Public Defenders), Judge Richard Baldwin, and one of the jurors. What's more, I learned more about the courthouse and how it works in four weeks than I have in five years of civil practice. I now know what judges do when they're not hearing civil motions and how misdemeanor cases and pleas are assigned.

The D.A. attorneys and staff, especially Senior Deputy District Attorney Jeff Howes, could not have been more supportive. Every door was open for any question at any time. Similarly, the judges, court staff, and public defenders were all professional to work with and helpful to this rookie criminal lawyer.

Can you do it, too? Yes. Several lawyers are slated to participate in the program in 2009. If you're interested, contact Wally Sweek (wsweek@cvk-law.com) or Dan Skerritt (dan.skerritt@tonkontorp.com) for details.