

Constitution Day brings history to life

By SAMANTHA SCHAEFER



Sarah Murray, 17, a senior at Rosary

High, asks a question to better understand the defense on a particular case in a mock Supreme Court hearing on Friday at Saddleback College.

PHOTOS: ANA P. GUTIERREZ, FOR THE REGISTER

<http://www.ocregister.com/news/county-317540-students-constitution.html>

MISSION VIEJO Sarah Murray, 17, donned long, black judge's robes for the first time Friday, joining a panel of six state judges to hear the case of Clarence Earl Gideon, whose 1963 landmark trial guaranteed a defendant's constitutional right to counsel in criminal cases.

In the mock Supreme Court hearing, Murray and fellow jurists quizzed prosecutors and defense attorneys as a way to teach nearly 500 Orange County high school students during Constitution Day activities held at Saddleback College.

"I love the law. Putting on that robe was a dream come true," said Murray, a Rosary High School senior who wants to be a defense lawyer.

The mock trial was just one of several activities held by the county's Constitutional Rights Foundation during its fifth annual Constitution Day conference at the Mission Viejo college. A 2004 law requires schools that receive federal funding to educate students on the nation's founding document.

This year's theme was defense of unpopular cases. The program included the Gideon hearing, a speech by the nation's second president, John Adams, and interactive workshops to teach students how the Constitution is part of their lives, said Alan Crivaro, chairman of the foundation's Constitution Day Committee. Other programs included a session on bullying, California's first female defense attorney and an essay writing workshop.

The judges panel included five Orange County Superior Court judges and Associate Justice Kathleen O'Leary of California's fourth appellate district.

O'Leary said the event helped to bring the Constitution to life.

“It breathes life into all those dry concepts they learn in the classroom,” she said.

That’s important, said Ed Leonard, president of the Orange County Chapter of the American Board of Trial Advocates.

“We have to get these kids to love the Constitution. They’re one year away from being jurors; they’re one year away from being voters. It’s not just a document you learn in school,” Leonard said.

Sandra Robbie, a Chapman University staff member, spoke about the 1947 Mendez v. Westminster case, in which it was ruled that segregation of five families into “Mexican schools” in Orange County was unconstitutional. The case was cited by the Supreme Court in its 1954 desegregation decision, Brown v. Board of Education.

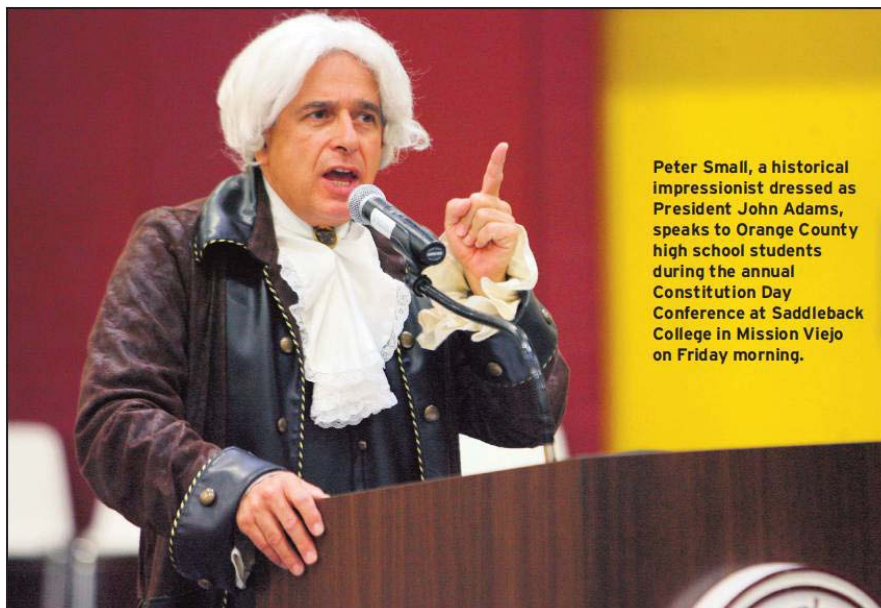
Robbie, who won an Emmy for a documentary on the Mendez case, said she wanted students to know that change can happen anywhere and that Orange County families helped move the nation away from segregation.

Noemi Ruiz, a junior at Century High School, said segregation still seems to be an issue in Orange County, but appears to be largely socioeconomic

She said she enjoyed seeing students from across the county come together, but wished there was more time for discussion so the students could exchange ideas.

Jake Cleaveland, a senior at Pacifica High School, said he enjoyed seeing how the Supreme Court worked during the mock trial because he hears a lot about the courts, but not often about a trial’s discourse or how things actually run.

“It’s incredible that we have a system that protects our rights,” Murray said. “But there are still a lot of problems, and that’s why I want to get involved.”



Peter Small, a historical impressionist dressed as President John Adams, speaks to Orange County high school students during the annual Constitution Day Conference at Saddleback College in Mission Viejo on Friday morning.

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