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Law School News: Mandell-Boisclair Justice Camp Prepares Young Scholars to Become Future Lawyers, Social Justice Advocates

RWU Law's inaugural law camp brought middle school students to our Providence campus to dive deep into the American judicial and legal system.

July 26, 2024

By Jordan J. Phelan '19



Attendees of RWU Law's inaugural Mandell-Boisclair Justice Camp held at the downtown Providence campus engage in a debate with Providence Mayor Brett Smiley, left, serving as a panelist and WPRI 12 investigative reporter Tim White, right, as the moderator.

PROVIDENCE, R.I. – Inside the bustling halls of Roger Williams University's downtown Providence campus, middle school students engage in spirited debate, their voices rising and falling with the cadence of impassioned advocates. At the Mandell-Boisclair Justice Camp, the atmosphere crackles with energy as the young orators, armed with well-crafted arguments, tackle the complexities of the American judicial system with spirit and precision.

Launched this summer, the Justice Camp is tailored for students in grades six through nine who are interested in fairness, civil liberties, environmental justice, and voting rights advocacy. Conceived by RWU School of Law professors to inspire the pursuit of law studies, the camp provided budding attorneys and advocates with an intensive, hands-on experience aimed at igniting a lasting passion for critical thinking and civic responsibility. Drawn by a collective curiosity and desire to learn more about the importance of law in daily life, 20 campers from

across Rhode Island participated in deep discussions with esteemed members of the Rhode Island judiciary and legal community, RWU law school faculty, and state leaders while actively exploring the nuanced facets of social justice during this weeklong program.



Attorney Mark Mandell, who sponsored RWU Law's inaugural Mandell-Boisclair Justice Camp along with his wife, Yvette Boisclair, provides opening remarks to campers.

"Our goal in helping create and in sponsoring the Mandell-Boisclair Social Justice Summer Camp is to foster equal opportunity for all people," said Mark Mandell, a personal injury attorney with Mandell, Boisclair & Mandell, who, along with his wife, Yvette Boisclair, sponsored the camp and enabled free attendance for the students. "We believe it is vitally important to have diversity in the practice of law, including judges, lawyers, and professors of law."

Addressing the campers, RWU School of Law Dean Gregory W. Bowman emphasized the transformative power of legal education, highlighting how it equips individuals with the tools to effect meaningful change in society. "As future lawyers, you will change the world. You will make the world a better place. You will defend democracy. You will help people one day at a time, one client at a time, one project at a time. That's how you make a difference."



U.S. Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.) speaks to campers about the importance of law and justice in a democracy.

Delivering opening remarks at the camp, U.S. Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse echoed Bowman's sentiments, reminding the students of the critical role they can play in upholding democracy and freedom. "We're experiencing the most concerted, covert, and persistent attack on our democracy in my lifetime, so it's important to pay attention, learn how to fight back, and look behind the curtain to see what's really going on. This camp will help you develop that skill, and I hope it stays with you."

Defining Justice

Throughout the week, attendees engaged in various discussions and activities that challenged their perspectives and deepened their understanding of justice. These experiential, real-world learning opportunities included observing arraignments before state District Court Judge Melissa DuBose L'04; touring the R.I. State House as well as R.I. Superior and Supreme courts;

and exploring historical landmarks relevant to legal precedent, such as the Station Fire Memorial Park in West Warwick.



Nicole Dyszlewski, Assistant Dean of Academic Innovation and Teaching and Professor of Law at RWU, and Monica Teixeira de Sousa, RWU Professor of Law, provide campers with a foundational dialogue in the concepts of law and justice.

Leading an engaging introduction to law, Nicole Dyszlewski, Assistant Dean of Academic Innovation and Teaching and Professor of Law at RWU, and Monica Teixeira de Sousa, RWU Professor of Law, sparked a lively discussion among the students who expressed their passion for addressing social issues through the law, such as reproductive rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, gun violence, and environmental concerns like invasive species.

For Emma, a camp attendee, the law professors' insights into legal advocacy and gender equity resonated deeply with her, inspiring her to envision herself as a future advocate for marginalized groups. "I definitely want to stand up for girls more. I should be able to be comfortable in my own body," said the rising seventh grader from Dr. Edward A. Ricci Middle School in North Providence.

Throughout the discussion, Teixeira de Sousa demonstrated the diversity of perspectives on a variety of issues, explaining how views can differ based on geographic location and personal

experiences, and stressed the importance of addressing these dissenting opinions through legal means. “I love that you’re passionate about these causes and that they matter to you. You want to use the law to change policies and influence how we make decisions on cases and controversies. Maybe even how schools are run to ensure fair treatment for all students, regardless of whether they’re members of the LGBTQIA+ community or not. Your enthusiasm for justice matters,” she told campers.

Dyszlewski reinforced this sentiment, connecting the students’ ambitions with the mission of RWU’s School of Law. “This summer camp stands as the intersection where law meets social justice. The motto of our school is ‘Changemakers,’ and that’s who we envision our students, alumni, and the people who work at the law school to be. We’re using law to make the world a better place.”



Members of Rhode Island's legal system speak with campers on what justice means to them and how they can use their voice to make positive change in the world.

The Justice Camp held a variety of engaging lectures and roundtable discussions with Rhode Island attorneys and judges throughout the week. Among those, attorney Mark Mandell discussed his landmark litigation on the Station Night Club fire that won a \$176,000,000 settlement for victims and their families; and attorney Zach Mandell led the campers through a conversation about environmental justice.

At a roundtable discussion underscoring the responsibility and impact lawyers have in everyday life, R.I. Supreme Court Associate Justice Erin Lynch Prata shared her personal experience, stating, “For my family, if something goes wrong or they receive something in the mail they don't understand, no matter the hour, I am their first call. And it’s great to be someone's lifeline. As a lawyer, you have the ability to help other people every single day.”

RWU Law Professor Diana Hassel spoke about the characteristics and skills that are needed for social justice work. “The work of a social justice lawyer or advocate is being able to see issues from different perspectives and apply specific facts and general principles before the court to protect your client and yourself.”

A Chance to Debate

On the third day of the camp, students experienced firsthand the significance of debate as a tool for presenting diverse opinions and refining advocacy skills. After being assigned prompts on contentious topics ranging from social media regulation to educational policy and voting rights, they sharpened their skills at preparation sessions at the Providence Public Library and RWU. Working in teams and engaging with experts like R.I. Secretary of State Gregg Amore and RWU Law Professor Sarah McConnell, students gained practical insights into the dynamics of public discourse and the persuasive argument which is a critical skill for attorneys.

The students practiced their skills with their own debate, moderated by WPRI 12 investigative journalist Tim White and guided by a panel including Providence Mayor Brett Smiley, Attorney John Meara, and Dean Bowman.



Attorney John Meara, right, provides student debaters feedback as Moderator Tim White and Panelists Providence Mayor Brett Smiley and RWU School of Law Dean Gregory W. Bowman listen.

The discourse on whether to make Election Day a national holiday was a standout of the week's programming, with participants passionately arguing both for and against the proposal. Those in favor of the idea emphasized that making Election Day a national holiday would promote and increase voter turnout, making elections fairer and more representative. On the other hand, the opposing team presented compelling arguments against the proposal, contending that same-day voter registration and voting by mail are more effective methods for increasing voter turnout than establishing a national holiday.

In a succinct closing statement, Ellie, a rising first-year student at North Providence High School, summarized the opposition's stance. "We need to remember that the cons outweigh the pros on this matter. Making Election Day a national holiday will harm more than it will help. People will lose money on this holiday than they would have gotten by working, and parents will be even more affected as schools and child care centers will be closed."



Emma, a rising seventh grader from Dr. Edward A. Ricci Middle School in North Providence, responds to questions from panelists during the debate.

The panelists were highly impressed with the students, noting several key takeaways that highlighted their effectiveness and potential – including the use of specific, quantifiable examples – and encouraged them to consider running for office in the future. They also provided constructive feedback to help the students further improve their debate and public speaking skills.

As the camp came to a close, Dyszlewski reflected on how much the students learned and grew in the span of one week. “While they may have come into camp with a concept of lawyer born from billboard ads and media depictions, our 20 campers left the camp with a richer, more nuanced understanding of what it is to be, or interact with, a lawyer, seeing them as helpers, heroes, social justice advocates, problem solvers, and mentors,” she said. “This camp is evidence of the transformative power of legal education in shaping informed, proactive citizens committed to upholding the principles of justice and equality in their future endeavors.”