



Justice Richard Gabriel meets with Gunnison High School students following the Courts in the Community oral arguments.

## Courts in the Community

Through Their Eyes

BY SARAH COLEMAN

Twice a year, Colorado's Supreme Court justices leave the Ralph Carr Judicial Building to hold oral arguments at area high schools as part of the Courts in the Community program. The justices visit one school in the Denver metro area in the fall and one school outside of Denver in the spring. This May, the Court held oral arguments in two cases at the Gunnison High School in Gunnison, Colorado. I watched the arguments, met with the justices, and spoke with students, teachers, and lawyers about their experience with the program. I share their thoughts in this article.

### The Judicial Perspective

According to the Colorado Judicial Branch website, Courts in the Community "gives high

school students hands-on experience in how the Colorado judicial system operates and illustrates how disputes are resolved in a democratic society."<sup>1</sup> I asked Justice Brian Boatright, who oversees the program, why the Supreme Court chooses to hold oral arguments in schools. He said, "I call it food for the soul when we get to meet all these great kids." Justice Boatright added that getting to visit other parts of the state and engage students is "energizing for me, and I think for the rest of the Court."

Courts in the Community doesn't just benefit the justices; it also allows students and community members to observe justice in action. As Justice Boatright pointed out, the judicial branch is "really the most anonymous branch of the government." Giving a wider range of people

the opportunity to observe real proceedings "demystifies and it depoliticizes what we do" on the Supreme Court. Ultimately, Justice Boatright wants people to see and understand that the Supreme Court and the entire judicial branch is "concerned with people and the system."

Judge Steven Patrick, chief judge of the 7th Judicial District (including Gunnison County), echoed Justice Boatright's enthusiasm for the program: "[I]t is just a great opportunity for the community, and particularly the high school students, to get a better understanding of how the judicial system works and to see that the Colorado Supreme Court justices are real human beings." Judge Patrick also noted the justices' willingness to engage the audience's questions, not only about the judicial system and court process, but also about their personal lives and experiences on the Court.

### The Student Perspective

I spoke with several students from Western State Colorado University in Gunnison, and they all said they would probably never watch a court proceeding, let alone oral arguments

before the Supreme Court, if it weren't for the Courts in the Community program.

Ezekiel Meyer-Moore, a history major, said, "It was nice to see because it was so foreign to me before, and then they came to my town and it just helped me understand the whole judicial system, at least of Colorado." He pointed out that "a lot of people don't really know how certain branches of our government work." But, he added, "if you actually go to the events and see actually how it works, it's really eye-opening."

Christian West appreciated the effort the Court took to visit rural Colorado: "For them to come to Gunnison, I would have never expected that . . . it was a surprise" because "you don't get that every day." Dr. Maria Struble, a professor of political science at Western State, agreed with the students, noting that "we do not get the opportunity to interact with lawmakers and justices from the Colorado Supreme Court very often in Gunnison, and this was a wonderful opportunity to allow the students to witness the proceedings of the Colorado Supreme Court, especially since they are so different from the proceedings of a regular trial."

After the arguments, the justices gave students an opportunity to ask questions. According to Jared Jacobsen, a political science student with a pre-law emphasis, the justices' transparency, their "willingness to engage the audience," and "get more personal" was "awesome . . . it blew my mind, and it was really, really cool."

According to the Western State students, the Courts in the Community program is achieving its goal of shedding light on the workings of the judicial branch. All three students said that watching the court in action showed that the Supreme Court justices were just normal people doing their jobs (even if they are intimidating in their black robes).

### Promoting Access to Justice

Courts in the Community has an access to justice component, especially when the Supreme Court visits more rural and remote parts of Colorado. Justice Boatright explained that there are a few ways in which visiting these communities helps foster access to justice.

First, when the Supreme Court comes to a place like the 7th Judicial District, it gives the

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Court the opportunity to observe the differences in resources and culture across the state. Coming from his background as a trial court judge in Jefferson County, Justice Boatright has observed that "we had resources that other districts didn't have." It is important that the Supreme Court "be aware of" these disparities. "Riding the circuit," as he called it, gives the Court "an

appreciation for the different dynamics that exist in the different parts of the state."

Second, visiting high schools helps the Court "put a face with the decisions we make." Justice Boatright explained that the program tries "to identify cases that might be of interest to the kids." The Western State students were certainly interested. The civil case involved the interpretation of a statute imposing liability on a social host who provides a venue for underage drinking. Some aspects of the case highlighted the role of Facebook and other platforms in bringing people together for social gatherings. The students were especially interested in how their use and understanding of social media directly tied into the case. Ezekiel said that the social host case "hit home for me." Jared said that watching the lawyers and justices grapple with the role of social media invitations "makes you aware of how much this affects you." He noted that the social host case is one that "affects us personally as college kids" and the proceedings and decisions make him "realize how important it is." The realization that the Supreme Court's decision could have tangible implications for their lives makes students like Ezekiel and Jared want to get more involved.

Third, Justice Boatright hopes that Courts in the Community will help members of the public



Justice Melissa Hart speaks with students over lunch.

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Justice William W. Hood III listens to Gunnison High school students.

“feel comfortable in accessing justice.” He noted that court proceedings often bear little resemblance to what people see on television or in the movies, and this misperception might drive people away from the courts. Justice Boatright said, “I would hate to ever see somebody not try to seek justice because they’re afraid of the process.” He hopes that the demystifying and humanizing work of the program will allow the community to access justice with more understanding and less trepidation.

Finally, bringing the Supreme Court to communities throughout Colorado builds trust and confidence in the judicial branch. Justice Boatright thinks that if community members “have an appreciation that we are well-intentioned and care about people,” then “people [will] have confidence in the system.” Jared said that the Supreme Court “engaging with people in a small town like Gunnison” actually “helps to build more trust in local government” and the state judiciary.

**Expanding Civics Education**

Seeing how much students and community members appreciated the opportunity to participate in the Courts in the Community program, I asked Justice Boatright about the role that lawyers can play in making civics education more accessible. He said he hoped that “lawyers would make themselves available” for civics and social studies classes or get involved in mock trial programs. Lawyers can help explain the role of the judicial branch and the courts or talk about separation of powers. Justice Boatright reiterated

that lawyers can work with adults, as well as students, to provide civics education. Both he and Judge Patrick encourage lawyers to make themselves available to speak to community organizations.

The Our Courts program is an additional opportunity for lawyers to get involved. According to Judge Patrick, the program provides “trained lawyers and judges to explain processes and procedures,” and he noted that this is “one big positive step” for promoting civics education.

Other perhaps overlooked avenues for civic engagement are the judicial nominating and judicial performance commissions. Judge Patrick believes that lawyers can serve on these commissions and “explain to people how each of those work to ensure that we have a fair and impartial judiciary and do not have a ‘political’ judicial system.”

**Final Thoughts**

The Supreme Court’s visits to schools throughout the state plays an important role in giving communities insight into the role and process of the judicial branch, helps lay people understand that Colorado judges and justices are apolitical figures doing their best to grapple with difficult issues, and promotes the high standards of the judicial branch across the Colorado. Everyone I spoke with expressed their sincere appreciation for the Supreme Court’s visit and urged anyone to participate in the Courts in the Community program if they have the opportunity. <sup>CL</sup>



**Sarah Coleman** is an attorney with Coleman Law, which provides litigation support and legal research and writing services to Colorado lawyers on a contract or freelance basis. She would like to thank Justice Brian Boatright, Judge Steven Patrick, Jon Sarche, and Rob McCallum of the Colorado Judicial Branch and Dr. Maria Struble of Western State Colorado University for their assistance and contributions to this article.

**NOTE**

1. [www.courts.state.co.us/Courts/Education/Community.cfm](http://www.courts.state.co.us/Courts/Education/Community.cfm).