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The state Supreme Court made an appearance in the Mililani High School gym on Tuesday to hear the case of Blosson Bell v. Hawaii Public Housing Authority. The sitting justices were Lisa M. Ginoza, left, Sabrina S. McKenna, Chief Justice Mark Recktenwald, Todd W. Eddins and Vladimir P. Devens. At bottom, Klemen Urbanc, deputy attorney general, addressed the court.

# High school students get taste of the Supreme Court in action

*A special program enables the justices to go into the community to conduct a real case*

By Leila Fujimori  
lfujimori@staradvertiser.com

Nearly 400 students from Aiea, Leilehua, McKinley Mililani, Radford and Waipahu high schools packed the stands Tuesday at the Mililani High School gymnasium to witness a powerful “visiting team” in action.

But this was no exhibition game. It was the real deal with huge stakes.

The full “team” of the Hawaii Supreme Court’s five justices, dressed in their traditional black robes, dazzled the audience on a stage — also dressed in black and elevated off the hardwood gym floors, as they not only heard, but actively questioned oral arguments made by real attorneys in an actual case.

The event, no small undertaking, was the highlight of a learning program begun in 2012 by the state Judiciary, called “Courts in the Community,” and was designed to bring the court system to the people and give hands-on experience in how Hawaii’s judicial



system works. Mililani High School junior Catherine-Desneiges Zozo Lauzon said: “I do mock trials, so I’ve gone to 1st Circuit Court, but I’ve never seen a Supreme Court case carried out and I thought that was really interesting. I liked how they asked questions and they got to clarify things because oftentimes it’s something that gets lost. “I think it’s really important that ‘Courts in the Community’ exists and that they go to public schools all over the state.”

She added that it’s particularly important, in light of laws recently being overturned such as in Roe v. Wade, that people understand how the court system works. The program was also livestreamed on the Judiciary’s YouTube channel and broadcast live on ‘Olelo Community Media Television. “Courts in the Community is one of the Judiciary’s foremost programs to educate

Above, Justices Sabrina S. McKenna, left, Vladimir P. Devens and Mark Recktenwald were greeted by high school students and participated in a post-proceeding interview.

Please see STUDENTS, A12



# STUDENTS

Continued from A7

students and the public about the rule of law and the role of the courts in resolving disputes in a democratic society," Chief Justice Mark Recktenwald said in a written statement. "This program takes them beyond the textbooks and enables them to see for themselves that the courts provide a process with integrity, one that's designed to get to the truth. That understanding is vital to the future of our democracy."

For participating students and teachers, the program began weeks in advance in the classroom. They followed a curriculum developed by the Kamehameha V Judiciary History Center and the Students for Public Outreach and Civic Education of the University of Hawaii's William S. Richardson School of Law.

The students familiarized themselves with the case, *Bell v. Hawaii Public Housing Authority*, which involves Blossom Bell, a 41-year tenant of public housing in Pearl City who was evicted because her guest (her son-in-law) attacked and seriously injured another resident (her downstairs neighbor). The eviction board determined she violated her rental agreement by her guest's actions.

Prior to the May 12, 2020, incident, Bell had been an exemplary tenant since 1981, with only a single violation in 2020 for nonpayment of rent.

Bell's son-in-law, Daniel Lambert, was visiting his minor daughter at her home when Bell's downstairs neighbor, Aaron George, began spraying water into the gutter to get rid of mynah birds. Lambert, disturbed by this, confronted George, which led to the altercation.

Lambert left that day and never returned to the property.

HPHA evicted Bell Jan. 29, 2021, more than eight months later.

Attorneys from the Hawaii State Bar Association also volunteered to work with the high schoolers to prepare for mock trials in which the students argued the case.

Jason Duncan, Mililani AP government and politics



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Students listened Tuesday to the case held at Mililani High School gym of Blossom Bell v. Hawaii Public Housing Authority before sitting state Supreme Court justices.



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**Abiyana Moore**  
*Mililani High junior*



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**Annabel Fong**  
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big part of this process."

Following Tuesday's oral argument portion of the program, students were treated to two half-hour question-and-answer sessions (without media presence).

One was with the attorneys — Nicholas Severson and Cynthia Moore of Legal Aid Society of Hawaii, who represented Blossom Bell, the petitioner/respondent appellant-appellee, and Deputy Attorneys General Klemen Urbanc and Craig Iha for appellee/appellant Hawaii Public Housing Authority.

The other featured Recktenwald and Associate Justices Sabrina McKenna, Lisa Ginoza, Todd Eddins and Vladimir Devens.

Recktenwald said after the oral argument portion of the program that the justices would begin discussing the matter as a group the following day.

The case has gone from a grievance hearing to the eviction board, to the Circuit Court, back to the eviction board and back to the Circuit Court, which reinstated Bell's rental agreement in September 2023. But the HPHA appealed the matter to the Intermediate Court of Appeals, and it was transferred to the Supreme Court.

The high court has not yet rendered an opinion on the case.

and AP history teacher, said the students had two lawyers come in and debrief them about the case, going over major details, and the students participated in a moot court after reading the case, giving arguments and rebuttals.

He said the justices were played by the lawyers, who said of the students, "They're very insightful, very intelligent. They were very impressed how fast they caught on."

Mililani senior Madeline Mintz said, "I thought it was a really good opportunity to see how the justice system works, and as a student in AP U.S. government and politics, I feel like it's really beneficial when we start talking about the judicial system a little bit more and I can refer back to this."

While anticipating the event, she imagined it being held "in a courtroom setting, but the gym was just a little bit different because normally there's like sports games," she said with a laugh.

Lauzon, who wants to pursue law as a career, said the case was released to students in November. Some of those students, as part of an extracurricular activity in mock trials, will be assigned as witnesses, others as

attorneys. They create arguments and lines of questioning, then argue the case, all memorized, beginning in January before a real Circuit Court judge.

Students will compete for the state championship, and the winners will go on to nationals, she said.

Abiyana Moore, a Mililani junior, said, "It's pretty cool, and at least in my opinion, it gives an outlet to a lot of kids who I know who tend to be considered kind of nerdy in school but get to have that shine in an extracurricular activity."

Annabel Fong, Mililani senior and president of the school's mock-trial club, said, "Even those who aren't interested in pursuing law for their future careers — if they're into acting or any other activity like that — find themselves really enjoying mock trial because they prepare themselves for this role, like they become this witness. For them that's really fun. So for all these people that don't really have another outlet, they are able to convene and become a