



Full Court Press



Newsletter of the District of Columbia Courts

December 2019

2019 DC Adoption Day: 47 Children Adopted, 38 New Families Created!

The DC Superior Court and the DC Child and Family Service Agency hosted the 33rd Annual DC Adoption Day Ceremony on Saturday, November 16th, 2019. The ceremony was designed to celebrate the joys of adoption and encourage area residents to consider adopting or fostering a child in the District's welfare system. Forty-seven children were adopted in this year's celebration, creating 38 new forever families.



and adopted a second, third, or in one case fourth child!" said DC Superior Court Chief Judge Robert Morin.

"We had seven sibling groups adopted, as well as several parents we have seen before who came back

He went on, saying "To see children who might otherwise have been in foster care for a number of years, or possibly aged out of the system when they turn 21 without a family, officially become part of their 'forever family' is heartwarming."

Continues on page 6

DC Courts Host First-Ever HistoryPlunge Tournament for DC School Children

The DC Court of Appeals (DCCA) welcomed students from seven local public elementary schools for a tournament organized by the educational nonprofit LearningPlunge. The tournament served as the launch for a new initiative: HistoryPlunge. The event involved students from Murch, Stoddert, Hendley, Ludlow-Taylor, Bruce Monroe, Stanton, and Eaton elementary schools competing with one another by playing a variety of games. For all the games, the children used the HistoryPlunge cards through which they learn US history and civics.

The day began with the students getting a tour of the Historic Courthouse as well as an overview of the DC Court of Appeals functions. DCCA Chief Judge

Anna Blackburne-Rigsby welcomed the students and asked them a few non-tournament questions. She asked the students what qualities they believed would make a good judge; answers included traits such as honesty, integrity, and humility. The Chief Judge then asked them what qualities make a good student. The answers to the two questions were largely the same, Chief Judge Blackburne-Rigsby pointed out to the students, encouraging them academically and professionally. The Chief Judge also provided an overview of people and functions in a court system—people who work behind the scenes: such as the executive officer, law clerks, courtroom clerks and eve-

Continues on page 2

History Plunge Tournament at DC Historic Courthouse —from front cover

ryone working with the public to enhance access to justice.

For the tournament itself, students were divided into 24 teams and the teams competed in a series of different games. After the first few rounds, taking the students through all the games, they were given the chance to choose their favorite games to play for the following rounds. Since the occasion served as the launch to HistoryPlunge, it was also used to gauge which games the students are better at, and which ones they enjoy the most, so that the HistoryPlunge organizers can make any needed modifications in the future.

At the end of the day, there were two first place awards and two second place awards. LearningPlunge's goal is to encourage more than just winning the educational games, so in addition to the four placement awards, there were also awards given to students who displayed exceptional sportsmanship. The full list of award winners can be found at the end of the article.



Chief Judge Blackburne-Rigsby with team winners.

Alan Fishel, founder of LearningPlunge, thanked the DC Courts for hosting the HistoryPlunge launch in the Historic Courthouse. "When playing in a tournament centered around history and civics, there is no place more fitting than this nearly 200 year old building," he said.

While HistoryPlunge is a new concept, LearningPlunge is an established and successful local

nonprofit, launched many

years ago with GeoPlunge which has the goal of improving elementary and middle school age children's understanding of American geography. The idea was to make a game that taught geography that would be fun for every student, and play on more strengths than just memorization. "There are plenty of trivia games out there that work for kids who like trivia, but what about students whose strengths lie elsewhere?" Alan explained. With a game that could be enjoyed by all, students enjoy participating, and do not feel like they are going through a drill or engaging in forced memorization. The goal is to make learning easier and more fun. GeoPlunge has been very successful, with one school, for example, using the GeoPlunge system improving its schoolchildren's understanding of US geography an average of 240%! With the success of GeoPlunge, LearningPlunge started thinking that the model used for GeoPlunge could work for History and civics as well.

HistoryPlunge covers over 500 years of US history, from 1492 up to the discovery of the black hole. It also teaches civics, including concepts such as the three branches of government, and the length of the respective terms of the President, Senators, and



Continues on page 6

DC Courts Advance Access to Justice Initiatives

The DC Courts continue to work on programs and initiatives focusing on the first goal of the DC Courts Strategic Plan: Access to Justice for All. The Courts are committed to eliminating barriers so all can meaningfully utilize court services and protect their rights. Initiatives launched as part of the Strategic Plan are designed to make the Courts more accessible in various ways. Taking stock of recent initiatives, the items below provide a brief overview of what the Courts have accomplished and continue to work on.

Forms Help Online (FHO) - Filling out court forms can seem daunting to those unfamiliar with court processes. In addition, the Courts seek to minimize the amount of time people have to spend in the courthouse to file a case, seek redress or respond to complaints. FHO allows those involved in court cases, and those seeking to initiate a case to handle part of the process from home. The Courts sought to allow people to fill out forms in advance on a home computer, tablet or smartphone. FHO presents users with a series of questions and uses their answers provided to select the necessary forms and fill them out for the user. Initially, this program was only offered in the Court of Appeals, the Domestic Violence Division and Family Court, but recently it has been expanded to include Civil and Probate Divisions.

Electronic Sign-in - In order to further reduce wait times at court, the DC Superior Court expanded its electronic sign-in system. Such systems enhance efficiency for court users, reduce errors, improve communications, and provide data to inform management decisions. This year, the Court expanded electronic sign-in so that it is now available in the Civil, Domestic Violence, Family Court, and Probate Divisions, as well as Judge in-Chambers. With the expansion of E-lobby sign-in, the Courts have streamlined the process for those coming to court allowing greater efficiency and shorter visit time. Forty-four thousand court visitors have participated in the Electronic Check-In system since 2018!

Court Navigator Program- the Court Navigator Program (CNP) helps meet the goal of access to justice by assisting those visiting the court campus by answering questions, providing directions, and explaining court processes. CNP staff-members provide directions to various buildings and offices, occasionally escorting individuals to the office they are in search of. CNP professionals also explain cases move through the court system, so that those involved in a case know what to expect. The final form of navigation, service navigation, involves providing information about court services and other services and resources available to those in need of assistance. CNP has quickly become the first stop for self represented litigants and helps nearly 100 people each day, with 89% of CNP visitors saying they would seek Court Navigators help if they ever have to come back to court. **[See more on page 4]**

Interpreter Registry - On October 1st, 2019, the Office of Court Interpreting Services (OCIS) successfully launched the DC Courts Interpreter Registry. OCIS staff now has a calendaring tool that allows interpreters to post their availability, receive automated emails with assignments, dispatch and return themselves from courtroom events, and submit invoices. The registry and calendaring tool have improved the quality and efficiency of interpretation services provided to court users who need interpretation assistance.

Community Partnerships – The DC Courts are also partnering with community organizations to provide pro-bono, free or low-cost legal assistance to court users. These organizations include AYUDA, Bread for City, DC Volunteer Lawyers Project, Legal Counsel for Elderly, Neighborhood Legal Services, and Rising for Justice. Together these organizations provide help to well over 5,000 on a yearly basis, enhancing access to justice in DC tremendously!

To see more about the Strategic Plan and progress reports, see: <https://www.dccourts.gov/about/organizational-performance>

DC Courts Navigator Program Helps Enhance Access to Justice

To those without an attorney, navigating the court system can be challenging. Thankfully, the Court Navigator Program (CNP) can help. CNP staff members offer assistance to court visitors to help them effectively navigate both the Judiciary Square campus as well as court processes. They offer help with understanding court processes - explaining what forms need to be filled out or offices visited in order to complete court business most efficiently - and provide information to visitors on the various court services that are available and how to best access them. The program was developed by Dr. Jasmine Hedge in the Strategic Management Division.



may need help to understand court forms, documents and orders. Chuck Burke, CNP manager, has extensive experience in the Family Court Social Services Division, and is familiar with providing assistance. Chuck played a key role in the Juvenile Drug Court Program, serving as the community liaison. Before starting at CNP, Chuck helped youth in the Juvenile Drug Court Program earn their high school general equivalency degrees (GEDs). Chuck also worked in the Superior Court's Veterans Navigator Program, assisting veterans with court matters and helping them identify community resources. Chuck is familiar with serving the public and knows court programs well. Ron Scott helped develop the Fathering Court program, which helps fathers newly released from prison become meaningful parts of their children's lives, despite their previous absence. Ron used his knowledge of court procedures as an attorney, as well as his passion for launching new programs, to help launch CNP. Though Chuck and Ron had different career paths, they share a common desire – to help people successfully navigate the DC Courts, access justice and take advantage of available services. They both share a passion for helping people who may not feel empowered, may not have an attorney, or may not be familiar with the court system.

With its current office in the lobby area of Court Building B, the CNP window is one of the first offices visitors to Small Claims and Landlord Tenant courts (the two highest volume courts of DC Superior Court) encounter. No matter what questions they may have about being at court, Court Navigators can help. The CNP helps navigate in three separate ways: physical navigation, service navigation, and process navigation. Physical navigation includes escorting individuals around Court Building B and providing directions around the court campus. Process navigation involves explaining how the case will flow through the system. The final form of navigation, service navigation, involves providing information about court services and third party services that are intended to help court visitors, such as the Office of the Tenant Advocate.



CNP staff members Chuck Burke (pictured right) and Ron Scott (pictured left) have both worked at DC Courts for years and are able to assist visitors who

Since its creation in October of 2018, the CNP office has steadily grown in popularity. In the past year, CNP assisted people with 4,115 different cases, and on average they help approximately 89 people per day! Of those people, 92% have said that if they need to return to the court for whatever reason, they would utilize CNP again. Even with this tremendous success rate, Ron and Chuck are committed to improving the program every chance they get. In the past year the CNP Office has added a computer center and a resource kiosk to help litigants.

DC Courts' Employee Empowers and Changes Lives through Martial Arts

DC Courts' Marvin King (Chief Capital Project Manager, Capital Projects and Facilities Management Division) gives us an inspiring example of what's possible through dedication, discipline, and work-life balance strategies. His story has many lessons for us all.

As an adolescent, Marvin discovered the uniqueness of martial arts to one's mind, body and soul. After a long and dedicated career in martial arts, Marvin was recently featured in the 2019 Martial Arts Masters and Pioneers Autobiography Book and inducted in the American Martial Arts Alliance Who's Who Legends Hall of Honors. The induction ceremony, banquet, and book release took place earlier in the year in Las Vegas. The Martial Arts Masters and Pioneers book is the first-of-its-kind featuring over 200 martial artists from around the globe,



sharing their stories of why they got involved in the martial arts and how the martial arts have impacted their lives. Over 600 nominations were received, but only 200 were selected for this honor.

Through his teaching, Marvin King has impacted the lives of many seeking personal empowerment through the principles taught in the martial arts. "Martial arts training differs from just working out in many ways," says Marvin. "I was like most young people who start martial arts training for the cool fighting skills and exercise. I quickly learned during those early days in the dojo that to earn a black belt you need discipline, patience, and courage. I fell down a lot and wanted to quit. But I didn't, because the benefits of martial arts started to outweigh any reason to quit. Through discipline and consistent training, I eventually earned black belts in two martial art systems, studied many styles, and taught many



students. Today that martial art spirit and tenacity learned in the dojo and training halls still drives how I view life and manage wellness."

But martial arts encompass much more than fighting. Unbeknownst to many, the martial arts offer some fun and complimentary wellness programs that include Tai Chi,

Qigong, meditation, yin yoga, strength training, strength stretching, joint mobility, and holistic wellness. All require no contact but still develop the mind and body to that of a disciplined well-trained warrior. Here are some of the many benefits of martial arts and complimentary martial art exercises:

- The positive encouragement you receive in the dojo lead to greater feelings of self-confidence in your daily life.
- Martial arts strength training improves your posture.
- Qigong movement and breath control improves your bodies awareness and balance.
- Tai chi, Qigong, and meditation are scientifically proven to reduce stress. The exercises can be adapted to most any age or physical condition and can be done in just minutes per day.
- Practicing martial arts provides complete aerobic and anaerobic conditioning.
- Martial arts moves involve crossing the midline of the body, which has been proven to enhance brain health.
- Lower body stability is emphasized in the martial arts especially since martial artists need a strong base from which to execute several popular movements. The lower body strength improvements also tone the glutes and stabilize the hips joints.

Marvin King has been able to impact the life of many people through martial arts. In Marvin's words: "You don't have to please anyone! You only have to be the best you that you can be! Find a path, stay humble, and always march forward courageously."

2019 DC Adoption Day—from front cover

NBC4's Barbara Harrison emceed the event, introducing each child and sharing their story with the audience. As each child came to the stage, she offered them a chance to say a few words about their new families, and invited them to meet the DC Courts' emotional support dog, a black lab named Pepper.

The event included musical performances from Kristina Flemming, a very talented young singer who aged out of foster care in DC last spring. At the end, she presented Barbara Harrison with a bouquet of roses and led the crowd in singing Happy Birthday to her. The DC Boys Choir performed the National Anthem and two other musical numbers which were incredibly well-received, and the event included two dance performances by local youth Kyra and Audrina Johnson, Adrian Epps and Brianna Vice. The day was a complete success, with smiling children, joyful families, a DJ, a clown, facepainting....and warm feelings all around.



History Plunge Tournament at DC Historic Courthouse —from page 2

members of the House of Representatives. The fact cards for each US president even include the number of successful Supreme Court nominations that the president made.

HistoryPlunge aims to be as effective as GeoPlunge. Alicia Francis, a fourth grade teacher at Ludlow-Taylor Elementary was incredibly impressed with History-Plunge. "Adding the game to history is what makes it work." Students enjoy playing the game, and they retain the information better when they learn it while enjoying themselves as part of a competition." As Alan said, "The kids learn more because they're having fun." However, it is not just the game structure, as the information is presented on the cards in an easily digestible manner. "It's so informative; I use the cards even when not having the students play the game," says Alicia. Game structure aside, the information presented in History-Plunge is easily understood by students, making it an easy way to comprehend complex ideas like civics.

The initial HistoryPlunge tournament was a big success. LearningPlunge has more tournaments planned in the future for students in elementary, middle, and high schools.

Kick-Off Tournament Award Winners at the DC Historic Courthouse:

1st Place:

Stoddert Elementary team 115
Murch Elementary team 109

2nd Place:

Hendley Elementary team 119
Bruce Monroe Elementary team 103

Sportsmanship awards

Stanton Elementary Team 117
Ludlow-Taylor Elementary Team 104
Stoddert Elementary Team 114
Eaton Elementary Teams 106, 110
Hendley Elementary

DC Courts: Living Our Values

The DC Courts continue to make progress with a multi-year initiative to highlight and bring to life the DC Courts values of Accountability, Excellence, Fairness, Integrity, Respect and Transparency. The initiative is focused on deepening the integration of DC Courts values set forth in the Strategic Plan into the day-to-day operations and culture of the Courts.



DC Courts' senior leaders recently gathered at an off-site meeting to discuss leadership principles and identify opportunities for growth in the future.

Areas of discussion included: best management practices, talent development and collaborating across the organization. Two themes emerging from feedback sessions over the years have been: (1) increasing collaboration to improving consistency across the organization: and (2) empowering employees to recommend work process improvements and encouraging innovation and creativity. You'll be hearing more about various initiatives moving forward.

Throughout 2019, employees across the Court of Appeals, the Superior Court, and the Court System participated in values projects, including group exercises, roundtable discussions, and town hall meetings to keep everyone informed of initiatives and stretch opportunities available to them; established values teams or divisional Living Our Values plans; and conducted 360 degree reviews of everyone in a leadership position.

Earlier in the year, employees participated in Values Pulse Check surveys to provide updated feedback. The surveys indicate over 90% of employees are aware of and committed to living the Courts values. 60% of employees report seeing progress in how the values are lived. Among court divisions, 72% improved in accountability, 44% in excellence, 78% in integrity, 61% in fairness, 50% in respect, and 72% in transparency.



ACCOUNTABILITY

We take responsibility for our conduct and are answerable for our performance.

EXCELLENCE

We provide the highest quality of service in everything we do.

FAIRNESS

We are impartial in our actions, decisions and treatment of others.

INTEGRITY

We demonstrate the highest standards of ethical behavior.

RESPECT

We treat everyone with dignity, courtesy and understanding.

TRANSPARENCY

We are open in our processes and communicate our actions and decisions clearly.

DC Courts Celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month

The DC Courts' 2019 Hispanic Heritage Month Committee, co-chaired by Rosemary Montano and Nelly Montenegro, focused this year's events on the theme of "Hispanic Americans: A History of Serving Our Nation." The month-long celebration at the DC Courts consisted of three main events: (1) a Networking



and Recruitment Mixer, hosted in the Historic Courthouse, where staff learned about previous Hispanic Heritage Month celebrations and built community amongst supporters of Hispanic Heritage in the DC Courts; (2) a showing of "The Latino List: DC Courts' Edition", a project led by Committee-members Rita Blandino and Raquel Trabal with the support of Courtroom Technology staff Jakeila Rice and Michael Simms, at which court staff shared their experiences as Hispanic Americans in the United States and how those experiences shape their contributions to the DC Courts and community; and (3) the annual presentation of the DC Courts' CORO Awards to prominent individuals and organizations serving the DC community.

This year's Coro Award recipients included: Jilma Lasso, recipient of the Legal Community Award, for her compassionate service to elderly Hispanics through the DC Superior Court Probate Fiduciary Panel; Hermanas in the Law, recipient of the Community Agency Award, for its groundbreaking work to increase the number of "Lawtinas" in the legal field by providing aspiring Latina lawyers resources and mentorship opportunities as well as promoting the work of Latina lawyers in the field; and Edwin Sorto, recipient of the Allan Kline Special Recognition Award, for his dedication to his students at KIPP DC Quest Academy Public Charter School in Ward 8 of the District (referred to as "Estrellitas")

through Caribbean dance classes that bring them culture, confidence, and an outlet to be silly and just "be them."

Rosemary Montano orchestrated a "Day at the Courts" for the KIPP students, so they visited a courtroom

and learned about various roles at the courts (judge, juror, prosecutor, defense attorney, witness) and then Darryl Lesesne and Nancy Matos brought them to a conference room where they had a snack and heard from Judge Hiram Puig-Lugo, Acting Executive Officer Cheryl Bailey, Acting Deputy Executive Officer Herb Rouson, and DC Superior Court Clerk of Court Zabrina Dempson. The students asked very insightful questions and learned a great deal from their visit, in addition to the contribution they made by their impressive dance performance.

The DC Courts truly celebrated the richness of the Hispanic American experience, culture, and built a strong sense of community through this year's Hispanic Heritage Month events!

