

# White Station High School's mock trial team has winning way

## Commitment of coaches builds history of victory

- By [Jane Roberts](#)
- Memphis Commercial Appeal
- Posted March 19, 2011 at midnight



Attorney Eugene "Buddy" Bernstein points out the mock trial trophies in his home, earned by his White Station High teams over the years in competition. Bernstein has taken a passion to the legal experience he has coached with students as a volunteer for 31 years.

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Eugene "Buddy" Bernstein put 250 hours into his part-time job last year and didn't earn a dime. He didn't expect to make a penny.

The pay is in the dozens of students he's seen take off through high school mock trials, the coaching gig he signed up for in 1980 at his alma mater, White Station High.

Thirty-one years later, he's built five state champion teams (last week's win in Nashville makes three in a row) and recruited so many colleagues from the local bar association, Bernstein, 57,

admits "it's dangerous to get near me."

"Leslie Ballin helps. Judge (Robert) Childers has volunteered and Judge (James) Allen was on the elliptical trainer one day next to me at the Y," he said.

Asst. Dist. Atty. Mark Erskine and labor lawyer Nicole Bermel (former students) are volunteers. So is Glankler-Brown partner Jeremy Alpert, Judge John Fowlkes, lawyers Abby Webb and Nicole Grida, psychologist Dr. John Ciocca and engineer Brett Grinder.

By day, Bernstein runs Bernstein Law Office at his home on Gardenia. As soon as the late bell rings at White Station, he or his wife, Michelle Bernstein -- a lawyer and former judge -- are there, coaching the intricacies of court and the case the students are working on.

"If I went through the rosters of the last 30 years, I could pick a hundred kids whose parents never thought they would be able to stand in front of a group and express themselves," Bernstein says. "They developed poise. They developed analytical skills. They developed the ability to think quickly and express themselves well."

He coached last year through cancer and a hip replacement, once getting to school by reclining in the back seat while his daughter drove "because I couldn't sit," he said.

"I went on a walker and taught the class.

Mock trial is so popular at White Station, Bernstein has had two teams since 2008.

Half the members are assigned to prosecution; half to defense. Being selected for the position of lawyer on either side is like getting the lead in a play.

**Molly Mulroy, 15, daughter of law professor and County Commissioner Steve Mulroy, played the role on the championship team this year.**

**"The coaches may seem intimidating because they are big fancy lawyers who know what they are doing. But by the end, you are friends with them and look to them for advice instead of worrying if they are judging you or not," she said.**

Bernstein, who is not a teacher but is now studying to be one, delights that his White Station High proteges -- many of whom didn't know a plaintiff from a defendant last fall -- beat St. George's Independent School, St. Mary's Episcopal School and McCallie.

"Heretofore, mock trial has been dominated by private schools," said Bernstein.

"He has a great rapport with students," said White Station High principal David Mansfield. "He's at school all the time. There's no doubt he's got the longest ongoing commitment at White Station."

Bernstein starts the school year with a two-hour "mock trial" course he teaches after hours.

"It's open to anyone who wants to come. Most years I get 80 students," he said.

Then he and the five other volunteer coaches (all Bernstein recruits) "get together and haggle about who will be on the team."

His interest is helping students understand the U.S. judicial system and their role in a democracy.

"I don't try to make them lawyers. I try to make them thinkers."

Students nationwide work on the same case "or problem," as Bernstein calls it.

"His heart and soul is really into it," Ballin said. "Certainly people can volunteer to do certain

things with a wink and promise, but he treats this as if it were the most important task before him."

Mock trial is not covered by school budgets. When the White Station team needed money to travel to the national contest last year, parents sold coupon books and Bernstein got on the phone.

"This has become a central activity in my life. ... There are not a lot of things for lawyers to do who are civic-minded, except politics. I have a knack for teaching. ... It's a way for me to give."

-- *Jane Roberts: 529-2512*

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### **Competition highlights**

Sixteen teams from Tennessee high schools competed in the mock trials state contest March 15-16 at Metro Davidson County Courthouse in Nashville. Tennessee Supreme Court Chief Justice Connie Clark presided over the championship match.

White Station High School won for the third consecutive year.

The national contest is May 5-8 in Phoenix.

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