

# GRACE IN THE MOCK TRIAL COURTROOM: A PROFESSOR'S PERSPECTIVE

BY NICHOLAS MILLER, J.D., PH.D.



Recently, I traveled with 10 students from the Washington Adventist University (WAU) mock trial team that I coached to our regional competition at Princeton University. We were scheduled to participate in four trials against university teams from up and down the East Coast. We were also accompanied by my co-coach Stephen Brennwald, D.C. attorney and WAU alumnus, and Jonathan Scriven, associate director of the WAU Honors College and director of the WAU Center for Law and Public Policy, which houses the Pre-Law and Mock Trial programs. The students are a group of creative, bright, fun, spiritually inquiring and committed young people who are a delight to work with.

For them, it was their first mock trial experience, due in part to the interruption by the COVID-19 pandemic. For me, it was the continuation of a journey begun about 20 years earlier when I coached the very first mock trial team at WAU in the 1990s. At the time, the American Mock Trial Association (AMTA) did not make allowance for Sabbath observance. Thus, our team was limited to one invitational match with the University of Maryland. I was very proud of those students who won that invitational match against an impressive Maryland team, one that went on to win the national championship that year. But in the subsequent years, the AMTA created a schedule that did allow for the participation of Sabbath-keeping teams.

This team was not only representing WAU but also their Sabbath convictions. We were given special times on Friday afternoon and Saturday night for our first trials, whereas all the other teams had two trials on Saturday. Two other teams graciously agreed to participate on our altered schedule. We expressed our appreciation to both the AMTA and the other teams for accommodating our convictions. The trials went well, but there was no storybook ending, with the WAU storming to victory in their maiden campaign. Rather, we were defeated in all four of our matches, an expected outcome for a team full of rookies. But the students gave more than a good accounting of themselves.

All the other teams we played had attorneys with multiple years of experience, but our team was right in the competition. All three of the WAU attorneys appeared multiple times on the list of best attorneys over four different trials. Three of our witnesses also appeared on the list of best witnesses. There was a total of 28 teams from a variety of well-known and much larger schools, including the University of Maryland, Princeton University, Yale, and Tufts. At one trial, when our opposing team heard that we were from a school of only 400 students, they broke out into spontaneous applause. As coaches, we were justifiably proud of our students and their representation of our school.

Just as importantly, this group of students also blessed the Princeton Seventh-day Adventist Church with a wonderful praise and worship service on Saturday. There, I had the privilege to preach on religious liberty and the Sabbath; but it was the students, and their joyful and enthusiastic playing, singing and worshipping that was the highlight of the service. I was gratified that the students also paid attention to the sermon, prompting a lively discussion of the Sabbath on our afternoon walk and a desire by some of our non-Adventist students to study it more deeply and its prophetic role.

This was truly a unique weekend of representing WAU, our faith and the Sabbath in student pre-law circles at a national level. We saw grace in the Sabbath accommodation that allowed us to participate, in the schools that volunteered to work with our schedule, in the friendships that were made with members of the other teams, as well as in the wonderful worship and praise we enjoyed as a group on Sabbath. So far, we are the only Adventist university to participate in this program, and we challenge our sister schools to take up the gauntlet and join us! In the meantime, those interested in a tremendous pre-law experience should consider carefully this program offered at WAU.



(Above) WAU student Henrique DaSilva is cross examined by opposing counsel from the United States Military Academy at West Point team.

(Below) WAU attorney Ajeya Watson questions a witness as co-counsels Shea Standish and Gopi Sunkara look on.



The WAU 2023 Mock Trial team