

## Coming Together Through the Law

By Joshua D. Brookstein, Esq.

The law brings people together. That's why I dedicate my time to mentoring young people and coaching a mock trial team. Breaking down stereotypes, building self-confidence, and fostering a sense of community are essential elements in the development of the social-emotional intelligence of our youth. In today's world, our young people are subject to the diminution of civil discourse and the ability to disagree respectfully. Unfortunately, the state of our discourse is increasingly filled with hyperpartisanship and the assignment of blame, more often than not based on preconceived notions rather than actual experiences in engaging with those with whom one disagrees. The sad reality is that, instead of coming together as Americans, we, too, are often planting seeds of divisiveness within our next generation of leaders when we should be unifying them through compassion, communication, and cooperation. High school mock trial programs, however, are one way to reverse this trend.

The practice of law encourages lawyers to be skilled advocates while, at the same time, being respectful adversaries. Often, disputes are resolved prior to trial by lawyers who have mastered the facts, understand the positions of all the parties, and worked with their adversary to amicably resolve the controversy. When a trial is necessary, courts of law are designed to be places where litigants can present their evidence in a structured and respectful environment. Litigants are represented by counsel who are subject to the same procedural, evidentiary, and ethical rules. Grounded with knowledge of the law, lawyers are charged with utilizing the facts and evidence to persuade disinterested fact-finders. Lawyers excel by being strategic, open-minded, adaptive, creative, and persuasive, not by pre-judging their case or their adversary. How, then, can lawyers use this framework to help high school students develop their social-emotional intelligence? One way is by coaching a high school mock trial team.

Six months ago, the Crescent School, an Islamic Pre-K to 12 school in Hempstead, New York, informed me that the school, for the first time in its history, would be entering the New York State Mock Trial Competition and asked if I would serve as its coach. The school's faculty advisor, Hajra Naeem, informed me that the team would consist solely of ninth- and 10<sup>th</sup>-grade students, many of whom were uncomfortable with public speaking and had little to no interaction with children or adults who were not part of the Muslim faith. More concerning to me, however, was that Ms. Naeem shared with me that the rise of Islamophobia had negatively impacted the day-to-day lives of her students. Whether it is walking to the store, riding the bus to and from school, or even just going to a public space, many of her students had unpleasant encounters with other members of the community. Through mock trial, however, this would soon change.

In Nassau County, the Crescent School was one of 48 schools participating in the New York State Bar Association's 2017 Mock Trial program. Public, private, charter, religious, and secular schools were all represented. The law brought students together from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. For my team, mock trial provided students with an opportunity to develop their skills in critical thinking, public speaking, and collaboration. Students learned how to think on their feet and present persuasive arguments. More importantly, however, this

experience provided students with the opportunity to engage with other students from different backgrounds in a fun, competitive, and respectful atmosphere. Through the tournament, scores of schools with diverse populations were brought together to interact and learn from each other.

In the mock trial courtroom, it did not matter where you went to school or what religion you practiced. Whether you were from a public school in East Meadow, an all-girls Yeshiva in Woodmere, or an Islamic school in Hempstead, all that mattered was your respect for the law, the mastery of the facts, and most importantly, showing respect and professionalism to the court, your adversary, and the witnesses. The law and the mock trial program served as positive and uniting forces.

At the conclusion of each round of competition, the real winners were the students who participated in the exercise. The success and, in my opinion, the real purpose of the mock trial program are measured not by how far a team gets in the tournament, but rather how each participant hones their ability to communicate and advocate with respect for others, regardless of race, ethnicity, or religion. I am hopeful that mock trial and the process of learning and practicing the law will continue to be a mechanism for unifying our youth through compassion, communication, and cooperation.