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DECEMBER 6, 2023

# Immaculate Heart students excel in Mock Trial competition



Immaculate Heart middle schoolers celebrated their championship victory on Dec. 4 in the Los Angeles County Junior Division Mock Trial competition at the Stanley Mosk Courthouse. (photo courtesy of Immaculate Heart)

Immaculate Heart Middle School has been named the Junior Division champion of the 46th annual Los Angeles County Mock Trial competition. The school clinched first place – for the first time – in the finals event on Monday, Dec. 4, against Pasadena Polytechnic Middle School at the Stanley Mosk Courthouse in downtown Los Angeles.

It marked the second year in a row that Immaculate Heart has reached the finals, and it was the first time the team has competed in-person since the pandemic. The 25-member team, featuring sixth, seventh and eighth grade students, was also the youngest group Immaculate Heart has ever fielded in the competition.

Sixth grader Harper Colbert received the Most Valuable Player award at the finals for her portrayal of a prosecution trial witness. Also recognized was eighth grader Olive Gruber, who received third place as a courtroom artist in the competition.

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Paving the way for Immaculate Heart's victory was the school's defense team, which had a winning performance in the semi-finals match on Nov. 27. During that event, eighth grader Sasha Patton was named MVP for her role as an attorney. The defense team's success in the semi-finals propelled Immaculate Heart's prosecution team to the championship round.

Los Angeles County Superior Court Commissioner Gabriella Shapiro served as presiding judge at the finals. Among the other scoring judges was Darin Beffa, board chair of Teach Democracy, formerly the Constitutional Rights Foundation and the chief sponsor of the Mock Trial Program.

The Los Angeles Mock Trial Program is an academic competition with more than 2,500 high school and middle school students competing at the county level. Student teams study a hypothetical case, conduct legal research and receive guidance from volunteer attorneys in courtroom procedures and trial preparation. The trial itself is a simulation of a criminal case, in which students portray lawyers, witnesses, court clerks and bailiffs. Students also serve as courtroom artists, journalists and understudies.

Since organizing in August, Immaculate Heart's team has practiced three times each week in preparation for this year's murder case, involving a sibling rivalry. Guiding the students were Immaculate Heart alumna and former judge Lorraine Munoz, class of 1972, and faculty moderator Carolyn Polchow. They were assisted by Immaculate Heart High School freshmen Madi De Leon Wagner, Addie Pavey and Alexandra Mahoney, all former members of last year's Middle School Mock Trial team.

Polchow said the coaches worked with students to create their line of questioning as well as opening and closing statements. Munoz also provided basic scripts that the students tailored to fit their style and comfort level. However, the team's rehearsals involved more than students simply memorizing lines for their assigned roles, Polchow said.

"In the actual competitions, you don't know what the other team will ask on their direct examinations of their witnesses or what they will ask our witnesses on cross-examination," she said. "As a result, the students need to be quick, critical thinkers who can process information as it comes to them in the trial and then make appropriate responses."

"While learning about the legal system, the students also develop skills in critical thinking and public speaking, gain confidence and build teamwork," Polchow said. "In all the many years of doing this, the best moments for me are the smiles on the faces of students who start out the year unsure of themselves and end up overcoming their fears and performing," Polchow added. "Also, a number of our Mock Trial alums have gone on to be very successful debaters for the high school debate team."

Founded in 1906, Immaculate Heart educates and empowers young women in sixth through 12th grades. The campus is located at 5515 Franklin Ave. For information, call (323)461-3651, or visit [immaculateheart.org](http://immaculateheart.org).



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