

Wainwright teens make mockery of legal system

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ANCHORAGE – No one disputes Lee Smid's death was a tragic end to a young life. The question is whether Smid decided to play his ill-fated round of Russian roulette to go along or to get out.

It's also the question some Fort Wainwright teenagers have been asking themselves since November, when they were given the case they would try March 8 in the 2003 All-Alaska Mock Trial Championship.

The Lathrop High School mock trial teams journeyed to the downtown courthouse here to test their legal mettle against 15 other Alaska high school teams. Team One finished fourth and Team Two, formed on the bus ride down from Fairbanks, finished sixth.

Army kids on Lathrop's teams were senior James Mills, son of Lt. Col. Michael Mills, 4th Battalion, 11th Field Artillery Regiment; senior Shanna Burnabe, daughter of Staff Sgt. Roy Laronde, HQ Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment; junior Elizabeth Ransom and sophomore Sabine Beguhl, daughters of Staff Sgt. Paul Ransom and Sgt. 1st Class Kenneth Beguhl, Company A, 4th Battalion, 123rd Aviation Regiment; junior Kendall Applewhite, son of Sgt. Annette Applewhite, 203rd Personnel Services Battalion; and freshman Sabrina Featherstone, daughter of Sgt. 1st Class Robert Featherstone, Special Troops Battalion.

The competition challenges students to try a civil or criminal case from start to finish, said team adviser Capt. Jim Culp, Fort Wainwright Judge Advocate General office.

Each school's team took part in four trials against teams from other schools, with a team's defense taking part in two and their prosecution trying the others. The teams' presentations were scored by the jury consisting of legal professionals from the Anchorage area. The top two scoring teams faced off against each other at the end of the day to determine the champion.

This year's teams tackled a hypothetical civil case with the plaintiff suing an insurance company for a payment following the death of the plaintiff's son while playing Russian roulette.

The insurance policy contained a clause excluding payment for death by suicide and the case boiled down to both sides trying to prove Smid's intent when he picked up the weapon, Culp said, and it was not cut-and-dried with a clear legal ruling obviously pointing at one side or the other.

The evidence of the case is so evenly balanced on

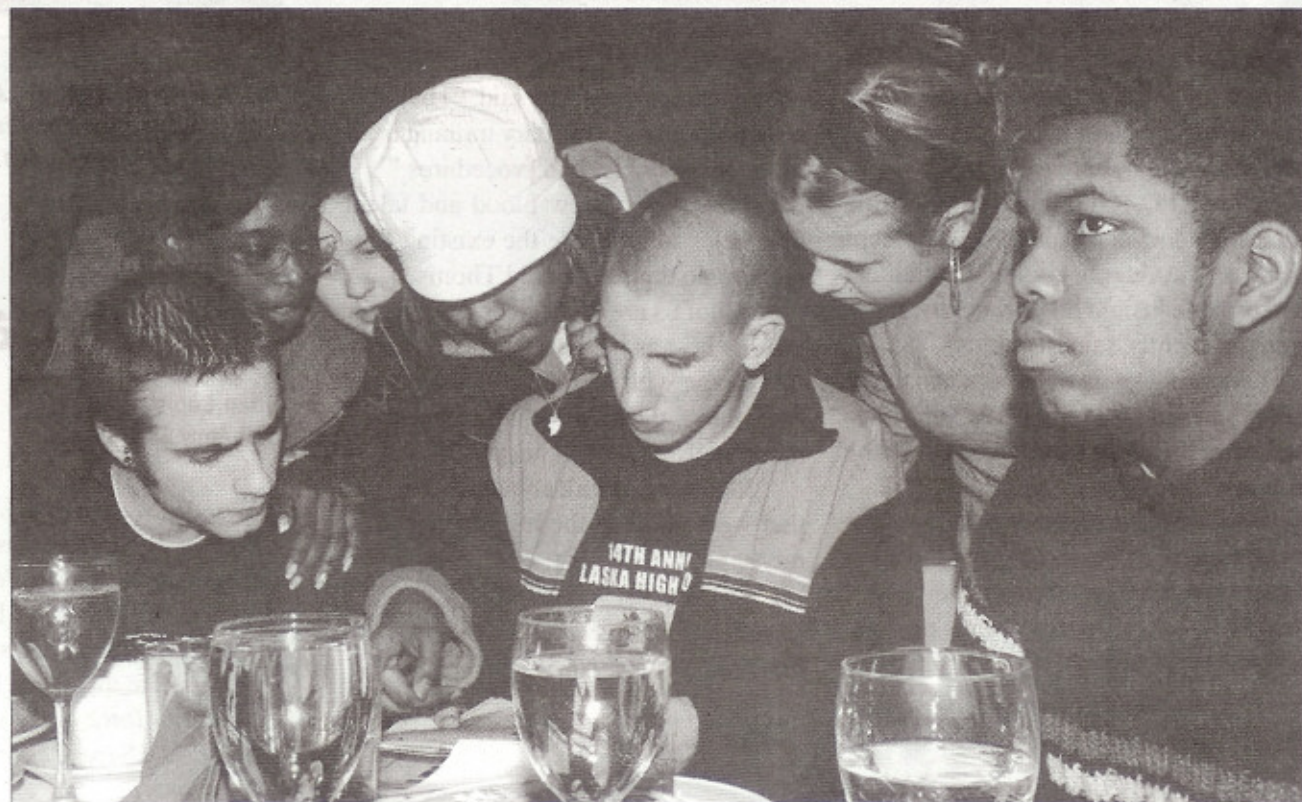
both sides of the issue that teams had to rely on their skills in presenting arguments to win their cases.

"The evidence is evenly weighted so if one side is unsuccessful in presenting evidence, the other side will have an overwhelming advantage," Culp said.

The students prepared their case on their own time, two days a week after school and on weekends, for the past four months, said Applewhite.

The teens' hard work paid off when Team One re-

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ANCHORAGE – Checking out their scores from the All-Alaska Mock Trial Championship March 8 are, from left, adviser Sam Brace, son of Col. Michael Brace, Dental Activity-Alaska, and Lathrop High School students Nekinia Wright, Ruth Zimmerman, Shanna Burnabe (daughter of Staff Sgt. Roy Laronde, HQ Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment), James Mills (son of Lt. Col. Michael Mills, 4th Battalion, 11th Field Artillery Regiment), Devin Person and Daniel Flynn.

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ceived their fourth-place scores and Team Two was told of its sixth-place finish at the Saturday evening banquet.

Lathrop's high placing reflected the quality of their presentations that day, Culp said.

"Some of the work these students displayed today would put some lawyers I've seen to shame," he added.

"My closing skills are damn good," said Applewhite, referring to the closing arguments he made as part of the defense team.

The team's fourth-place finish is a testimony to the students' dedication in working weekends and after school, said Lathrop principal Christine Smith, noting that other schools around the state offer a mock-trial class allowing students to meet and prepare every school day.

Culp's help was a key factor in their finish, according to Beguhl.

"Capt. Culp was really a great coach," she said. "We could always ask for his opinion on different things in the case, but he always let us make our own choices on what to do." The experience solidified Beguhl's desire to become a lawyer.

Culp has advised the last three Lathrop Mock Trial teams, with this one being his last as he finishes his tour in Alaska. The school will be looking for someone to continue Culp's invaluable assistance, said Smith.

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