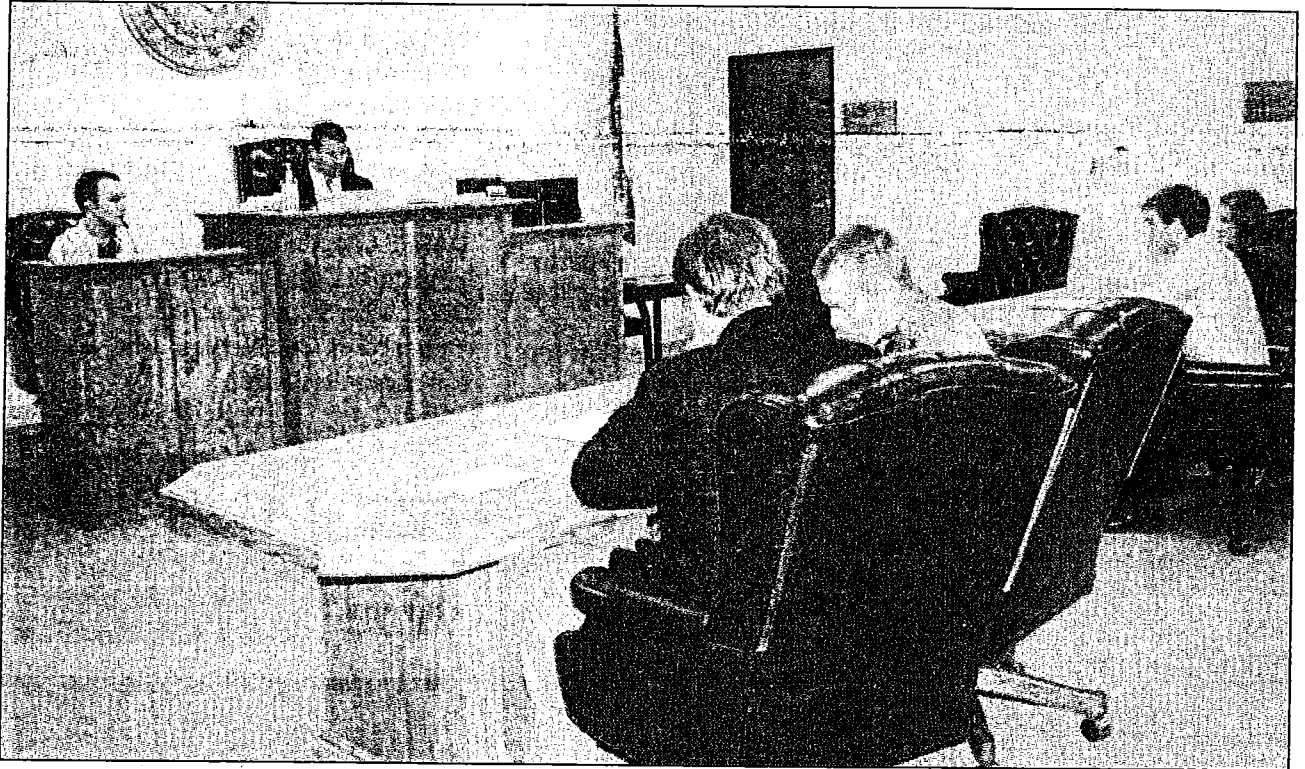


A jury of their peers

Local students exercise justice in Parker County Teen Court



JUDY SHERIDAN/DEMOCRAT PHOTO
Trent Tudor, 17, was on trial for speeding last week in Parker County's Teen Court. Above, attorneys for the defense — Ashton Patterson and Gage Chamberlain — and attorneys for the prosecution — Kyle Kleckner and Tyler Ramsey — confer before making presentations to the jury.

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A jury of his peers threw the book at Trent Tudor last week, tasking the 17-year-old with 25 hours of community service — the maximum sentence for his Class 2 offense: driving 81 miles per hour in a 65 mile per hour zone.

“Do you accept this sentence,” Parker County Precinct 4 Commissioner and stand-in judge Dusty Renfro asked Tudor, a repeat offender, sternly. “Is there any reason you cannot complete your sentence?”

Tuesday night was Tudor's first appearance in Parker County Teen Court, an option for teens who plead guilty to Class C misdemeanors.

It is an alternative to sentencing through a municipal or Justice of the Peace court.

The three entities which participate are Justice of the Peace Precinct 2, Justice of the Peace Precinct 4 and the City of Hudson Oaks.

Justices refer eligible defendants to the court, where they are represented by teen defense attorneys and questioned by teen prosecuting attorneys.

Other youth, as jurors, weigh the testimony and convene to decide — unanimously — how many hours of community service to assess.

Often, by doing so, they are fulfilling a part of their own sentencing requirements.

Offenses are divided into six classes, retiring Teen Court Coordinator Donna Gentry said, each permitting a range of community service hours and a set number of jury trials.

A Class 1 offense might be driving without a license, punishable by 10 to 20 hours of community service and one jury duty.

A DUI falls in Class 6, Gentry said. Jurors must assign between 100 and 125 community service hours and defendants participate in several jury trials.

Tudor, cited Nov. 18, was the first to stand trial in Judge Lynn Johnson's Precinct 4 courtroom in Willow Park Tuesday night.

Attorneys for his defense — Ashton Patterson and Gage Chamberlain — asked the jury for the minimum 15-hour sentence.

They pointed out that Tudor was speeding to get home before curfew and asked

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him about his grades, which he said were "typically all As."

Attorneys showed that Tudor's parents were already punishing him, and he was working to pay for the ticket and insurance, too.

"Will you drive under the speed limit from now on," they prodded.

"Will you help with chores? Will you obey the traffic signs?"

Tudor replied that he would, but he also had to admit to a previous speeding ticket when questioned by prosecutor Kyle Kleckner.

The Teen Court program — active in many Texas cities — was initiated in Parker County through the efforts of attorney Victoria Prescott, who solicited sponsorship from the Aledo Children's AdvoCats, Gentry said.

The court held its first trial in December 2005, Prescott, who now serves as a mentor/judge, said.

Johnson said the program teaches personal responsibili-

ty and co-ops kids into the justice system.

"Rather than parents paying for the ticket, kids have to take ownership," she said. "They have to give community service hours, they have to work it.

"They also become willing participants in our justice system. When they get a jury summons, they'll choose to participate. They're more likely to become better citizens."

Trent's mother, Jody Tudor, said her son had received a prior speeding ticket, which he kept off his driving record by completing a defensive driving course.

The course can only be completed once a year, however.

"They offered him deferred adjudication [for the second ticket], but his dad and I thought that it wasn't enough punishment," she said.

Tudor said her son began his community service shortly after receiving his second moving violation. He had already completed 16 hours by his March 6 court date,

folding and ironing clothes for the AdvoCats and helping out at McCall Elementary.

"They let you get started," she said. "It's kind of good if the defense brings that up."

Once defendants finish their sentences, their cases are dismissed and the offenses do not appear on their driving records.

Prescott said several hundred teens have participated in Teen Court since its inception in Parker County, some deciding to go to law school as a result.

"The kids learn so much, and they have fun doing it," she said, "it's great experience for speaking on your feet, which is important in any kind of job."

Parker County's Teen Court is a non-profit, Gentry said, and relies on adult volunteers.

Laura Anderson is the Teen Court coordinator. Perri McCranie and Michelle Hayes are student volunteer coordinators and Erin Noskin is the community service hours coordinator.

Adult volunteers also serve as court judges.

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