

Citizen Academy Shines Light on District Attorney's Office



The fall 2012 Citizen Prosecutor Academy graduating class included 40 individuals from various backgrounds and age groups. The 12-week class explores all aspects of the Dallas County District Attorney's Office to give citizens a better understanding of the office and criminal justice system.

THE DALLAS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE CITIZEN PROSECUTOR ACADEMY IS AS DIVERSE AS DALLAS COUNTY ITSELF. Participants, ranging in ages 18 to 70, learn about all aspects of the district attorney's office during the 12-week course.

Classes are held twice a year in the spring and fall, and are taught by volunteers, including in-house prosecutors and outside presenters from local area organizations.

"We wanted to create a learning environment where the participants would be able to fully explore the operations of the D.A.'s office, and at the same time ask questions regarding the functional steps of the criminal justice process," says James Tate, program administrator and founder of the program that began in March 2012. "Our hope is still that the participants will leave the academy more empowered and take what they have learned back into their communities."

Participant Jonnie England described the academy as "an amazing experience."

"Hearing from the prosecutors and investigators, and learning about their enormous caseloads and what's involved in bringing the accused to justice, was eye-opening," says England. "Now I'm so much better informed as to how our judicial system works."

Tate said he called Dallas County District Attorney Craig Watkins about starting the academy, and Watkins was on board from day one. "We are greatly pleased with the over-

whelming response from our community," Watkins says. "The outcomes have been both positive and rewarding, and have exceeded any expectations that we had originally set out to accomplish."

One goal for Watkins and the district attorney's office is to ensure that people are not wrongly convicted and to overturn false convictions, says Debbie Denmon, communications director. Denmon says the academy participants learn about that process.

Tate and Julia Kang, the program director, are "amazed" at how involved the students are during the class, Tate says. "[The academy] has truly been one of the most rewarding learning experiences I have had," says Bonnie L. Mathias, a participant from Pleasant Grove. "I am much more knowledgeable about the justice system in Dallas County."

The academy also had some international interest when dignitaries from Mongolia observed the class. The program directors are planning to start an alumni academy for graduates to spread the word. "We hope to expand to other counties inside and outside of the state," Kang says.

The fall 2012 academy graduating class included 40 students. "The evenings I spent getting to know the people who work at the office brought me face-to-face with dozens of dedicated, even driven, people who fight the good fight for all of the rest of us," says Tom Gear, an Irving resident who participated in the fall class. "The prosecutor academy is a well-crafted expedition into law and order, Texas style."

Committed to Fitness, Helping Children

BILL BERENSON HAS A BUSY SCHEDULE RUNNING HIS OWN LAW PRACTICE, BUT HE STILL EXERCISES AND TRAINS FOR MARATHONS EVERY DAY. Eight years ago, he had just returned from running the New York City Marathon and wanted to get more involved in promoting exercise and helping youth in the Fort Worth community. He contacted the Fort Worth Independent School District and adopted the Rufino Mendoza Sr. Elementary School through its Adopt-A-School program.

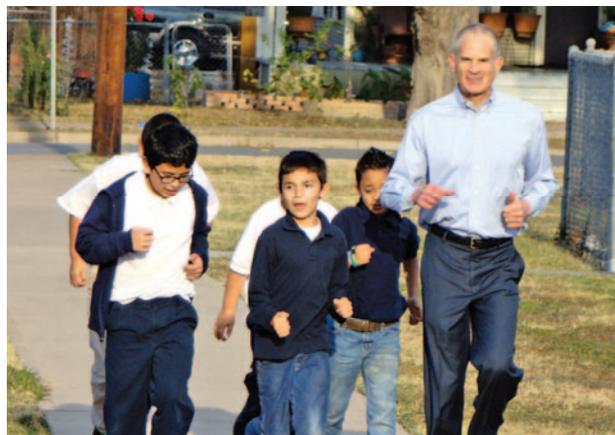
Berenson's goal is to inspire, motivate, teach, and mentor the students, and to help them get and stay fit by exercising and eating healthy. He believes that if those habits are formed early in life, they can turn out to be life-long.

As part of adopting the school, Berenson attends the annual Career Day. He talks to the students about the law and what they can do to achieve their dreams, whatever they may be.

"I see the kids soaking it up and wanting to succeed," says Berenson, a Fort Worth board certified personal injury attorney. "It is a moving experience."

He also helps with the school's fitness club twice a month on Friday afternoons. The activities range from playing kick-ball or running to exercising in the gym and helping the kids train for the Fort Worth Cowtown Children's 5K race. He tries to help them train for other races as well, and has helped to pay for their race fees and race clothes.

"We are grateful for the positive role model that Mr. Berenson has been for our students," says Blanca Galindo, principal of Rufino Mendoza Sr. Elementary School. "His



Bill Berenson runs with students from the Rufino Mendoza Sr. Elementary School.

dedication to our campus is extraordinary. He has high standards for learning and wellness and models that through example. Our students are always eager to visit with him because of his enthusiastic and energetic personality."

Berenson also has set high goals for his personal fitness. He ran his first marathon in San Diego as he was turning 50. Now, at age 58, he has run 40 marathons in 38 different states, including 30 fast enough to qualify for the Boston Marathon. His goal is to run a marathon in all 50 states by age 60. In addition, he will be running a marathon in Israel in January. In October, he ran a personal marathon record of 3 hours, 24 minutes, his seventh marathon in eight months.

Berenson was also a member of the Children's Activities for Life & Fitness Council, and he started a team to train for the adult Cowtown 5K race to encourage Tarrant County lawyers, staff, and law students to run. That is one of his main goals — to see more attorneys adopting schools or encouraging and motivating students to stay fit and stay in school.

TEXAS PEOPLE



Anna Martinez Boling
Boling & Aguirre, L.L.C.,
San Marcos

Inducted into the San Marcos Women's Hall of Fame for her volunteerism and leadership in the community.



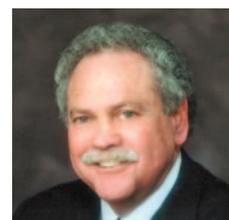
Mary Nichols
Texas Mutual Insurance Co.,
Austin

Received the 2012 Magna Stella Award for Major Litigation from the Texas General Counsel Forum.



Cristina Viesca-Santos
Assistant Attorney,
El Paso

Appointed to a national advisory committee of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.



Gary Gurwitz
Atlas, Hall & Rodriguez,
McAllen

Received the 2012 M. Dale Ensign Trustee Leadership Award from the Association of Community College Trustees for efforts promoting the community college concept.