

Mock Trial Experience

Foreword by Dora J. L. Dye and Article by Olga Mandrussow

*FOREWORD: In Spring 2001, the law offices of Heller Ehrman White & McAuliffe invited students enrolled in the Paralegal/Legal Studies Program at City College of San Francisco to participate in its mock trials in courtrooms at the San Francisco Superior Courthouse on Saturday, June 16, 2001. Below is an article written by **Olga Mandrussow** regarding her experience at the mock trial:*

Every semester, CCSF Paralegal instructors encourage students to participate in mock trials. Law firms usually put on mock trials as training sessions for recently graduated, newly recruited attorneys. The attorneys get the opportunity to deliver their cases in front of a jury and judge, while the volunteers (usually acting as jurors, but sometimes as witnesses) get to observe and be involved in a complete trial.

Last semester I was intrigued by a mock trial held at Stanford University. However, the scheduling did not work out for me. This past spring semester when I heard about a Heller Ehrman mock trial scheduled for Saturday June 16 from 9:15 a.m. to 5:45 p.m., I jumped at the chance. I telephoned Dora Dye, Paralegal/Legal Studies Program Coordinator, and asked for two applications--one for me and one for my sixteen-year-old niece, Antonina (Antonina eventually decided that she did not want to participate). Ms. Dye quickly responded; I filled out the applications and faxed them to the name and number listed. From the applications, I found out that the case would be about a recent widow who is denied insurance benefits for her husband because of his possible suicide.

For several weeks, I did not hear anything. I assumed that Heller Ehrman found a sufficient number of volunteers, and that my services would not be needed. Then, I received a questionnaire from Heller Ehrman, asking about my occupation and whether I wanted to be a witness or volunteer. Again, I dutifully answered the questionnaire and returned it to Heller Ehrman.

Then, Heller Ehrman sent me complete information about the mock trial held at San Francisco Superior Court, Civil Division, 400 McAllister. I was to show up around 9:15 a.m. and report to the Fifth Floor. When I arrived at the Courthouse, everything was set up and ready to go. Tomiko Russell of Heller Ehrman warmly greeted me and thanked me for my participation. I was impressed by her organization, professionalism, and graciousness.

I was on the jury, which consisted of about 8 people. One of the volunteer jurors was a young high school student, but the rest of us were between 30 and 60 years of age, mostly all women. Everyone seemed quite eager to participate and looked forward to the trial.

The three attorneys handling the case were definitely novices. Although they behaved well and convincingly argued their cases, I found myself bored by the plodding pace of the trial and the lack of sophistication. The morning session ended at about 11:45 a.m. Tomiko greeted each departing volunteer, giving us maps for the restaurant where we were all treated to lunch. The lunch was well organized and quite delicious.

The afternoon session dragged on until approximately 3:30 p.m. Then, the jury went to a small side room to "deliberate," while being videotaped and fed live into the courtroom, where attorneys and judge watched. I found the jury instructions a bit difficult to understand, even though we were given a written copy. Every juror had something to say about the trial, but we quickly agreed that neither side had built a strong case.

When we returned to the courtroom, the attorneys asked us about our impressions. Again, almost every juror was anxious to share his or her opinion. The attorneys listened intently to what each juror said. At about 4:15 p.m., the judge ended the session and we were excused.

I am glad that I participated in this mock trial. Although at times the pace was a bit slow, I still recommend the experience to other Paralegal/Legal Studies students.