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Fifth graders learn the law

By Ray Kappel

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The fifth graders coming to Law Day at the Pawnee County Courthouse Friday could see they had a big problem on their hands. One of the suspects was a twin brother of someone who was innocent.

(Law Day actually falls on May 1, but in Pawnee County it is celebrated on Arbor Day, a day when the courthouse is closed. It is the anniversary of Pawnee County Judge Curtis L. Maschman. He became a judge on Arbor Day 21 years ago.)

He presided over Law Day but had plenty of help from Clerk Larita Weber, County Attorney Jennifer Stehlik Ladman, Sheriff Jayme Reed, and attorney Diane Merwin. It was her twin boys, Chase and Tanner Motto who were part of the plot, as is James Jones and Trenton Plager.

The fifth graders didn't know what the plot was when they got there: and they had to think fast. It's all make believe, but it is effective. The Pawnee City fifth graders are first, then HTRS took its turn, then Lewiston before the morning was out.

It starts out with Judge Maschman welcoming them and during opening remarks his phone rings. He steps out to take the call and then the crime happens. Sitting over on the side of the courtroom are the four students at HTRS, Chase and Tanner Motto and James Jones and Trenton Plager. They are carrying on a loud discussion when Sheriff Jayme steps over and asks them to leave the courtroom. When they do, one of them sticks an iPad sitting on the attorney's table into his backpack and they walk on out.

Then Diane Merwin appears asking if anyone has seen her iPad. It is missing.

Now Judge Maschman takes over and explains that we have seen a crime and how do we get this crime taken care of by the justice system.

First on the scene is the Sheriff. She holds an investigation. She asks the students if anyone saw who took the iPad. No one answers.

Sheriff Reed said that is a hard part of her job, when people who may know something don't come forward with information. They may not want to get someone in trouble or they may have other motives.

She then carries on an investigation with the students' help. Who would be a suspect? The four HTRS students who walked out of the courtroom after they were too noisy. But two are twins, and only three have backpacks. Sheriff Reed then has the four boys up for questioning. Each one denies taking it. What should we do next? Search the backpacks. The iPad is found in Chase Motto's backpack and the sheriff files her report, turning the case over the County Attorney.

Jennifer Stehlik Ladman, the Pawnee County Attorney, then takes over. She talks

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about how to decide on the charges after reviewing the Sheriff's report. It depends partly on the value of the item taken. The charge will be theft.

Then it is the defense attorneys turn. Diane Merwin goes over questions the defense attorney might ask and the rights of the defendant.

Then it goes before the Judge. Now the Judge selects the court from the students. All of them participate. Olivia Gottula and Riley Kobza are prosecutors; Tristen Bradbury and Madison Branek are defense attorneys; jurors are Sam Brown, Kaeden Lang, Jacob Lytle, Sarra Parrott, Reyana Tegtmeier, and Kaleb Vetrovsky. The sheriff is Austin Branch and the court reporter is Graham Moore.

They get promptings from the adults, and they ask the right questions. The case goes to the jury and

the six jurors are asked if a 4-2 vote will convict the defendant. One girl

answers no. That's right, Judge Maschman said, it has to be unanimous for a conviction.

Because the defendant was under 18, he also had the right to take it out of criminal court and into juvenile court. Juvenile court is geared more toward rehabilitation, while criminal court is geared toward punishment. Also, once the juvenile court process has been gone through, the record stays clean of the defendant.

Then the students ask questions at the end and tour the court office on the second floor, getting treated to cookies.



Ray Kappel/Republican

Lewiston Consolidated 5th grader Hayden Christen asks a question of Judge Curtis L. Maschman at the Law Day program at Pawnee County Courthouse Friday Also pictured are Masyn Arena, and Jacob Condit.



Ray Kappel/Republican

HTRS had 32 students in the Law Day program at the Pawnee County Courthouse Friday.



Ray Kappel/Republican
Lewiston Consolidated 5th graders took part in the Law Day program at the Pawnee County Courthouse Friday.



Ray Kappel/Republican
Pawnee City's 5th graders took part in Law Day last Friday. They are pictured with their teacher Carol Schmit, Sheriff Jayme Reed, County Attorney Jennifer Stehlik Ladman, attorney Diane Merwin, Clerk Larita Weber and Judge Curtis Mashman. Also pictured are the four HTRS students who staged the 'crime' Chase and Tanner Motto, James Jones, and Trenton Plager.