

THE JUDICIAL LEARNING CENTER: AWARD WINNING, INNOVATIVE OUTREACH

Glenn E. Davis



There is a living and breathing educational forum on the rule of law and the role of our federal and state courts on the first floor of the Thomas F. Eagleton U.S. Courthouse in St. Louis. The Judicial Learning Center, as its name implies, is more than a museum with plaques and dusty exhibits on historical events or old noteworthy cases that seem far removed from society's current consciousness. No. It is so much more than a space with a mock courtroom and exhibits. There are important oral histories and interactive tools that breathe life into the past and compellingly teach the continuing impact of landmark decisions, renowned jurists, and the current functions of the federal courts in our circuit and their sister Missouri state courts. Here, life lessons for young and old on how our independent judicial system administers justice in the face of today's challenges are effectively delivered every day.

The Concept and the Reality

A collection of leading lawyers and jurists first conceived of the Judicial Learning Center in Y2K, upon the completion of the Eagleton courthouse. Their vision, of an accessible court with a real outreach function for the public, was unprecedented. Veryl L. Riddle, Thomas R. Greene, and other leading lawyers, together with former Chief District Judge Edward L. Philippine, began investi-

gation and planning for the project in mid-2000. From the beginning, the project received enthusiastic support from the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals and its clerk, Michael Gans. Originally incorporated as a 501(c)(3) corporation on October 19, 2000 as the "United States Courts Learning Center," the organization held its first Board of Directors meeting on December 13, 2000. Prominent lawyers Allen S. Boston, W. David Wells, and Douglas F. Ritterkamp were among the first directors at that meeting.

As federal courts are constrained in fundraising efforts, the lawyers on the JLC Board launched a fundraising campaign, and the Board expanded. Lawyers and law firms gave generously to achieve the original \$1M goal to make the concept a reality. Leadership Gifts were provided by Bryan Cave LLP and Thompson Coburn LLP; Major Gifts by Gray Ritter & Graham P.C., Husch Blackwell LLP, and the Law Offices of Thomas R. Green; and Special Gifts by the Federal Practice Memorial Trust, Holloran White Schwartz & Gaertner LLP, Lewis Rice & Fingersh LC, and Senniger Powers LLP. The Bar Association of Metropolitan St. Louis Bar Foundation, Dowd Bennett LLP, the Jordan Charitable Foundation, and Sonnenschein LLP provided additional friends support.

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The JLC created an Education Task Force and began planning, with input from the Missouri Historical Society, the Missouri Bar Association, and several local school districts, for both static and interactive exhibits and designs for build-out of the first educational center of its kind. The court, with the cooperation of the General Services Administration, identified first-floor space, and the Board enlisted Taylor Studios, Inc. for design and layout assistance to create an open, inviting, and purposeful space. On February 25, 2009, retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor helped dedicate the opening of the Judicial Learning Center.

Delivery on the Promise

From the mid-2000s to date the Judicial Learning Center has enjoyed an unbroken upward trajectory. It became a passion for former Clerk of the District Court Jim Woodward and has benefited from the Court's 2010 engagement of an enthusiastic and talented Public Education and Community Outreach Administrator, Rachel Marshall, whose contributions have been immense. Former Chief Judge Catherine D. Perry and District Judge E. Richard Webber have provided countless hours of enthusiastic support and work. As the outreach mission took shape, the Judicial Learning Center Board attracted other

leading lawyers and supporters, including Joseph P. Conran; Robert F. Ritter; former Board President Thomas E. Wack; the Honorable Richard Teitelman from the Missouri Supreme Court; Monica Allen, General Counsel of Washington University; Millie Aubur, Director, Citizenship Education for the Missouri Bar; Board Secretary Mary M. Bonacorsi; and others. The dedication, diversity, and depth of talent of the Board is extraordinary.

To promote public understanding of the judicial branch and its value, especially at the federal level, the Judicial Learning Center engages in a wide spectrum of activities. We support and provide the educational jumping-off point for courthouse tours, provide grant funds for transportation of hundreds of secondary students from throughout the district to educational field trips to the court, provide online learning tools for students (our online Student Center) and lesson plans, classroom resources, and tests for secondary school social studies, civics, and history teachers (our online Educator Center). We have developed close working relationships with the St. Louis City schools and other districts with high hurdles. Both the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts have programs through the center. Students also participate in an essay contest, this year focused on Miranda rights. We

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have co-sponsored the Danforth Lecture Series, including such notable speakers as former Eighth Circuit Judge and CIA Director William H. Webster. Additionally, we have provided summer teacher workshops to teach the teacher and co-sponsored widely acclaimed Street Law Workshops in St. Louis with the Missouri Bar. We also assist with senior groups for continuing education, including our partnership with the OASIS Program. With the assistance of Judge Webber, we also share unique perspectives through video oral histories of great former judges covering memorable events.

The work of the Judicial Learning Center has gained national attention. In both 2014 and 2015 the American Bar Association bestowed on the Judicial Learning Center and the Eagleton Courthouse its prestigious Law Day Awards for best student activities associated with Law Day. In 2012 the St. Louis Bar Foundation gave its Spirit of Justice Award to the center, for “demonstrated accomplishment, leadership, and integrity in fostering and maintaining the rule of law and in facilitating and promoting improvement of the administration of justice. “ And we are serving as a model for courts across the country trying to establish similar education centers for public outreach. We are humbled and grateful for these recognitions and they challenge us to keep at the forefront of court outreach and education.

The Future Is an Open Book That Will Be Well Written

The Judicial Learning Center has a proud past and an exciting future. In the most recent Board Retreat, plans for a Teacher Advisory Board, JLC Educator of the Year Award, JLC Student of the Year Award, updated interactive and historical artifact displays, careers-in-law information, attorney visits to classrooms through the Ready Readers program, work with the ABA Civics and Law Academy, and many other future possibilities were discussed. We also hope to more actively engage our rich university, museum, corporate counsel, and law-school-dean communities.

In our time, the needs for enhanced learning for young and old on the rule of law and the primacy of independent administration of justice are great yet underserved. The notes we receive from students who have experienced the center are a tribute to the power of education and offer hope for the future. Whatever directions we take, you can rest assured they will be well considered and will further public understanding and justice.

There is so much more to know; please visit our websites or Facebook page for more information. Our primary website, underwritten by Gray Ritter & Graham, P.C., is particularly robust (www.judiciallearningcenter.org). If you would like to become involved or have innovative ideas to share, we welcome your involvement and support. Please do not hesitate to contact us through our website or you can reach me directly at glenn.davis@heplerbroom.com.

Glenn E. Davis, JLC Board President. Mr. Davis is a partner with HeplerBroom LLC in St. Louis. His practice involves complex business trial and appeal matters, including antitrust, securities, and corporate disputes. Mr. Davis also leads the HBCyberGroup, which is focused on information security compliance and response legal issues.