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PVPA places well in mock trial

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SOUTH HADLEY - A notoriously successful mock trial team, Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter School in South Hadley came within a couple of points of advancing to the Massachusetts Bar Association's 2009 Mock Trial State Championship, but fell to Maimonides School of Brookline.

Competing in the semifinals held in Worcester mid-March extended the school's streak to nine straight years of at least making it to the state quarterfinals. A win would have earned PVPA a sixth finals appearance since the school's program began in 1996.

"We did very well," said mock trial coach, former lawyer and director of history Gary Huggett. "We were a good team, but they were just a little bit better. Close, but no cigar."

The students' individual performances are rated on a scale of one to 10 and PVPA senior Thea Briggs, of Amherst, scored the lone perfect score for her school.

Sarah Fisher and Rafael Jaeger join Briggs as the team's three graduates-to-be who have been in the mock trial program since they started high school. Their classmates Lyle Hathorne, Gary Forster and Ian Weston have all been on the mock trial team for three years, while fellow senior Jesse Hamelin joined this year.

Huggett said the seniors will be missed, but plans for the team to continue its successful run next year.

"We have a number of up-and-comings," he said.

After coaching a mock trial team and teaching history at a New Hampshire middle school, Huggett moved to PVPA where he continued to teach history and established the school's mock trial program. After two years, the team made it to the finals in 1998. In 2004 they returned again and won the state championship in 2005. PVPA also had final appearances in 2006 and 2008.

The program began its 24th year in January. The competition places high school teams from 16 regions across the state in simulated courtroom situations where they assume the roles of lawyers, defendants and witnesses in hypothetical cases. This year's criminal case involved a murder trial in which the defendant, a veteran, raises post-traumatic stress disorder as an insanity defense against the charge of first-degree murder.

More than 100 high schools across the state initially signed up to participate in the 2009 program. The preliminary trials began at the end of January. Local attorneys served as both team coaches and judges of the preliminary trials.

Maimonides School of Brookline beat Sharon High School for the championship at the Great Hall of Faneuil Hall on March 27.

For more information, visit www.massbar.org/mock.

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