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Local middle school pupils get a female point of view on law, legal profession; Women's bar program sends speakers into class

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The Howard County Women's Bar Association is dispatching female lawyers and judges to middle school classrooms to speak with pupils about the legal profession and answer such questions as "Why does Judge Judy act the way she does?"

"We're getting them to think about different aspects of the law," said Ria Rothvarg, chairwoman of the Law Day committee of the Women's Bar Association.

Since 1996, female lawyers and judges have been speaking to Howard County middle schoolers. Rothvarg said they are trying to reach eighth-graders who are learning about the U.S. Constitution and just beginning to think about careers.

"It's a good idea to start the program there," she said.

This year, Lynne A. Battaglia, the U.S. attorney for Maryland, addressed pupils at Owen Brown Middle School, and Ellen Koplw, managing partner of the Columbia office of Miles and Stockbridge, spoke to pupils at Burleigh Manor.

Not many women become managing partners in prestigious law firms, and Koplw said that forced her to work hard and assert herself to gain the acceptance of her male counterparts.

"I told [the pupils] to be aware of the choices they make," said Koplw, 39, the mother of two children.

Koplw told 15 eighth-grade girls that women sometimes have to be aggressive to gain respect -- something male attorneys often generate right away.

"People are going to assume certain things when they walk in the door," she said. "You have a certain presence, make it known in other ways. Your male counter-part who's 6-foot-4 and 240 pounds commands [that after] walking in the door."

Koplw was well received by the girls, said David Lee, a teacher in the Gifted and Talented Program at Burleigh Manor.

"Girls are just beginning to ask in-depth questions," Lee said. "Where am I going? What am I going to do?" This way they can explore it more in-depth."

Howard Circuit Judge Lenore R. Gelfman is scheduled to speak at Harper's Choice Middle School on Tuesday.

Gelfman, who has been speaking to students since the program started, said it's a good opportunity for jurists to step out from behind the bench and reach citizens.

"It's part of our civic duty as judges," Gelfman said.

Also speaking are: Rothvarg at Mount View Middle School on Monday; Cecilia Paizs at Dunloggin Middle on Wednesday; Judge Diane O. Leasure at Clarksville Middle School on Thursday; Sue-Ellen Hantman at Patapsco Middle School on May 7; and Brenda Fishbein at Glenwood Middle School on May 28.

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