

2020 St. Vincent's Youth Award Winner

Alana Burrows School of the Holy Child, Class of 2021

For the past two years, I have dedicated about 200 plus hours to the White Plains Community Youth Court. This is a divergent program from family court for youths in the community who have committed misdemeanors. Youth volunteers like myself, process their cases in a real court setting and take on various tasks such as the defense attorney, prosecutor, judge, jury, and bailiff.

As a youth court we believe it is our mission to give youths like ourselves a second chance and help them become productive members of society again. Through a sanction of community service and counseling given by the jury, we hope to fulfill our mission and help the respondent in whatever way possible. In my time volunteering at youth court, I have taken on the role of defense attorney and youth advocate/mentor in a variety of cases. I chose to take on these roles because I believed that the respondents are teenagers like me and the misdemeanor that they have committed, should not define them as a person and harm their future.

When I first started volunteering as a defense attorney, I was nervous because all I knew about the respondents was that they had committed a misdemeanor. However, as I got to take on more cases and participated in more meetings with the respondent leading up to trial, I was no longer nervous and realized that the respondents have goals for their future and participate in different extracurricular activities like myself. Aside from being their defense attorney, I was also able to be their advocate and present them in the best possible way to the jury. As their advocate I got to personally learn more about them, their likes and dislikes, and why they have committed a misdemeanor. Many of them don't have the opportunity or guidance to engage in positive activities so, as an advocate I was able to give them advice and connect them with different opportunities and long-term mentors in their community.

When we don't have a case in youth court, we think of ways to advocate and give back to our community. Besides our weekly meetings, we sometimes would meet on weekends for different events and recently we were able to advocate for an alternative to out of school suspension, as it was relevant to our community and preventing youths from temporarily continuing their education. In my two years with this program, I have been excited to attend the meetings and trials every week because I know that through all of our hard work we are helping someone just like ourselves, and after trial we see our respondents trying to better their lives and pursue their dreams.