

It's back to class for Justice Teaching volunteers

By Kim MacQueen

Associate Editor

Thanks to the efforts of Florida Supreme Court Justice Fred Lewis and an ever-growing list of volunteers, we already know that the [Justice Teaching](#) K-12 civics education program is going like gangbusters.

Since its initial inception two years ago as a statewide program, Lewis' pet project designed to provide interactive constitutional education to all Florida school children boasts 3,451 volunteers in over 3,100 sites representing nearly 99 percent of Florida schools. Thirty-four of Florida's 67 counties are



completely saturated with Justice Teaching volunteers — meaning they have at least one volunteer currently serving every elementary, middle, and high school.

What's most interesting, though, is why this approach works. What makes the program so popular and keeps volunteers coming back and students clamoring for more?

Justice Teaching trains and provides age level-appropriate curriculum to volunteer attorneys and judges who visit one classroom at a time to deliver civics education in an interactive, informal style.

It's an approach Lewis has used for more than 10 years of visiting Florida schools, talking one-on-one to individual students at all levels about the Constitution, teaching them about their rights as citizens by taking care to make the topic timely and relevant to their lives.

"We do things like look at First Amendment cases and then talk about what students cannot say in schools. We discuss landmark cases and what they mean. So as we have the highest

court in the nation ruling on cases, it's important that our students know what they're ruling on — they don't just make it up as they go. They've got this thing called the Constitution that applies to every facet of our lives," Lewis said.

"There really is a lack of civic education in this country, and so often students walk in with no understanding of our Constitution, and others walk in with a very cynical view of it, that it's nothing but a bunch of technicalities," he said.

He added that often his job during Justice Teaching visits amounts to "removing misinformation" about how the courts work.

He remembered encountering a young teenager just after a visit to her Miami middle school. As he was leaving, she came up to him, crying uncontrollably.

"She said to me, and she kept repeating, 'I'm not a bad girl, but I've made some mistakes, and I have to go to court on Monday,'" Lewis said. "And she said, 'now I believe I will be treated fairly, because I believe this system cares about its people.' That brings tears to my eyes every time I think about it."

After a visit, Lewis says, he can see the students "realize that the Constitution is something that they can have thoughts about, and they can tell me," Lewis said. "They can engage in that civic discussion about the ought-to-be's as well as the what-ifs."

The connection with students is what keeps Kristen Fiore, a staff attorney for Florida Supreme Court Justice Barbara J. Pariente, coming back to volunteer for Justice Teaching.

"When you first walk in, they look at you like, 'oh no, we have a visitor. This is gonna be boring,'" she said. "I've never had an experience where they're not completely engaged and begging me to come back. It really is rewarding.

"It gives me an opportunity to see what kids are feeling about the legal system, what kind of impression they're getting," Fiore said.

She said she finds an increasing number of them are learning about how the courts work by watching shows like "Law & Order."

"They get very excited because they can make connections to the issues based on what they've seen on TV. Also, a lot of times they'll have personal experiences in their families. They're facing these types of issues in their everyday lives," Fiore said.

She said she likes to talk about the Fourth Amendment, for example, in light of how it affects students' expectation of privacy of, say, their backpacks.

"Or we'll talk about things like whether or not they should be able to protest at school," Fiore said, referring to the First Amendment. "I like to create hypotheticals from the Internet or from social networking sites to make it relevant to them."

Fiore said she loves the program especially because she always wanted to be a teacher when she was growing up — just not more than she wanted to become a lawyer.

"Justice Teaching gives me the opportunity to use that kind of skill. I couldn't love the

program more. If I could do it every day, I would.”

The program has another powerful cheerleader in Bill Montford, chief executive officer of the Florida Association of District School the approach, the delivery by the volunteers, and simply the content of the program,” Montford said. “It’s like a breath of fresh air. The attorneys and judges can bring the material to life, and they make it so enjoyable that the students really look forward to the class.

“It’s quite impressive to young people to see that lawyers and judges are willing to come and speak with them. It’s an exceptionally positive program.” This is only two years old; it’s a baby,” Lewis said. “We need to get that foundation in place. We need to make sure we’re actively engaged with all of our schools and then we can take the next step and move forward.” For the future, he said, he’d like to see someone in his position take the program forward through its next 20 years.

“It was an enormous project to get into. Who would have thought that you could place a lawyer or a judge in every public school in the state of Florida?” Lewis said.

“This would have never happened without the wonderful lawyers and judges of Florida.

“It comes down to, when people do things for the right reasons, and not for money or power, it’s a thing of beauty.”