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With 2 a.m. video calls, students take on virtual moot contest

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After world travel came to a halt amid the coronavirus outbreak, an international moot court competition moved virtually. Participating students from UIC John Marshall Law School said the format presented new challenges.

The Willem C. Vis International Commercial Arbitration Moot, originally scheduled to be held in Vienna, Austria, with participants from over 400 law schools, was cancelled last month and reformatted to be held online.

John Marshall's students and coaches had already submitted written materials for the competition when the cancellation was announced, just under a month before the opening ceremonies.

"I couldn't be more proud of what we accomplished under very difficult circumstances," said Kristen Hudson, the John Marshall team coach.

Instead of in-person arguments before volunteer arbitrators, the moot format moved onto Immediation, an teleconferencing service designed for arbitration proceedings. And instead of jet lag-inducing flights, the competitors, judges, coaches and organizers sat in their own homes around the world, logged in and ready to go at unusual hours.

Vienna's local time is seven hours ahead of Chicago.

"Our argument times were at 12:30 a.m., 1:30 a.m., 2 a.m. and 7 a.m. respectively," said Hudson, an attorney at Chuhak & Tecson P.C. "We had our team on hype-up calls, all dressed up in their suits and full hair and makeup at midnight doing warm-up exercises and last-minute practices."

During the first round, the team encountered technical difficulties, causing their arguments to start nearly an hour late.

"Each team was allowed to have a coach listen in on the round as a guest," Hudson said. "I was able to get into the room with the arbitrators, but the platform had partially crashed and our team [Sara Geoghegan and Humza Ansari] was locked out."

Geoghegan said the video-conference platform seemed overwhelmed by the influx of users.

"Being alone, and competing in the middle of the night really required an even greater sense of teamwork and community for our group," Hudson said.

The John Marshall team competed against teams in Israel, Guatemala, Scotland and Italy during the preliminary rounds and had arbitrators calling in from the United Kingdom, Austria, Hong Kong, Jamaica and Canada.

"It truly was a global effort to get the competition moved to the virtual platform so quickly and to get a quality experience for the students," Hudson said.

The preliminary arguments took place April 4-7, with winners announced online on April 9.

Neither of the John Marshall pairs advanced to the playoff rounds of the competition, but second-year student Alexandra Pruitt received an honorable mention for "Best Individual Oralist."

Pruitt is the only 2L student on the four-member team. Pruitt was one of 27 honorable mentions this year, and one of only two from the United States.

"I actually saw the messages from my team congratulating me before I saw the actual announcement," Pruitt said. "I heard someone from our team had won something, so when I found out it was me I was in complete and utter shock."

"A lot of hard work and effort went into this, and I couldn't have done it without my awesome teammates and great coaches," she said. "They've been amazing and I've learned so much from all of them. The world is in chaos right now, and this experience brought me joy at a time when I think we all need a little boost."

Pruitt's partner in the arguments, Gabrielle Neace, said she enjoyed the experience and hopes it will serve her well as legal work continues to go virtual.

"I'm always trying to become a better advocate, and it's always good to learn new platforms. I think a lot of arbitration may go online in the coming months and years, and now we have experience with that. I wasn't comfortable at first on-camera, but we had a great group and I'm glad Kristen pushed us to our full potential with this," she said.

In addition to the four students who argued during the competition, John Marshall students Wyatt Sugrue, Lexi Hudson and Skylar Young contributed to the research and brief writing portions of the competition and joined Zoom meetings with the competitors to help them prepare.

The team is also coached by Daniel Saeedi and was assisted in its virtual argument preparations by actor Carolyn Kruse.

"The subject matter is some of the most difficult in any law school competition, and for most of the students this is their first introduction to international commercial arbitration and international business," Hudson said. "I'm happy our team got recognized for their hard work."