

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

VOLUME 166, NO. 50

LAW BULLETIN MEDIA.

Virus claims international moot court

UIC John Marshall team told of cancellation, may still have online event

JESSIE M. MOLLOY

jmolloy@lawbulletinmedia.com

The continued international spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus has halted the travel plans of thousands, including now law students from around the world set to participate in the annual Vis Moot court in Vienna, Austria, next month.

Students from 400 law schools around the world, including UIC John Marshall Law School, have been preparing for the competition since October when the hypothetical disputes the participants would argue were released.

Students and coaches, who have already submitted written materials for the competition, were notified of the event's cancellation last Friday, a slightly less than a month before the opening ceremonies were scheduled to start.

In the official cancellation announcement the organizing body wrote "while we would normally say one of the Moot's greatest strengths is that it is an event which brings together thousands of people from all over the world that is, unfortunately, we must recognize, one of its greatest risks today ... Due to the recent developments concerning [COVID]-19 it would be irresponsible to gather thousands of people coming from so many different countries and run the risk of further spreading [COVID]-19 into the world."

The event organizers have suggested that the event could be moved to a virtual format with teams using video chat

software to compete with their oral argument rounds, but the logistics have not been worked out and teams are awaiting official confirmation that the competition will proceed online.

"This is like the Olympics of law school," said John Marshall coach Kristen Hudson, an attorney for Chuhak & Tecson P.C. "We were heartbroken to hear it had been canceled, but we still have an opportunity to compete and we're going to hopefully gain momentum for this new format."

The cancellation was not without warning. Earlier in the year it was announced that the competition's sister event, The Vis East Moot in Hong Kong, was canceled due to concerns over the virus.

The smaller Hong Kong competition was scheduled from March 22 to 29 and will now be conducted online. Additionally, several premoots (practice events used like scrimmages before the competition) were canceled in the lead up to Vienna, including DLA Piper Madrid's premoot in Spain which the John Marshall students were slated to attend the week before the Vis.

"We were working on rescheduling our plans from Madrid when we found out Vienna was canceled," Hudson said. "We had been monitoring the situation closely, but we were cautiously optimistic."

The move comes as the Austrian government has closed all public museums, halted classes at universities and placed a ban on all large gatherings until the end of March.

It is also one of many precautions being taken by educational institutions. Several colleges, including Loyola Uni-

versity, have canceled study abroad programs and recalled students from international campuses in Italy and other parts of Europe and Asia.

Meanwhile, other schools including DePaul, Northwestern, University of Chicago, University of Illinois and Illinois State have canceled in-person classes at their U.S. campuses in favor of online teaching.

Assuming the Vis Moot moves forward online, Hudson still anticipates her team to be successful. The four students who had been slated to travel to Vienna have already made contact with other teams, including a group from the University of Tehran in Iran to practice their oral arguments over Skype.

"We'd been practicing our live oral arguments in front of alumni who volunteered to give us feedback, when we found out live oral arguments were being canceled," Hudson said. "We need to change our strategy to present via video conference and increase our efforts to make sure we're ready for a different platform."

To accomplish this, Hudson has enlisted the assistance of local actress Carolyn Kruse to work with the students on their on-camera presence.

"As actors transitioning from stage to screen the main difference is adjusting your circle of attention," Kruse said. "They have to keep their same preparation and emotion, but they have to learn to project only to the camera, not an entire room."

Kruse will also recommend the students record their practices so they can watch and critique themselves on camera.

"They'll do great. They just

have to flip a little switch inside them to adjust their performance while retaining all the information they've been working on," she said.

As for the competitors, 3L students Humza Ansari, Sara Geoghegan and Gabriella Neace, as well as 2L student Alexandra Pruitt, they have noted they were disappointed with the turn of events, but remain hopeful they will get to proceed in the new format.

"It was super shocking when we found out they were canceling the meet up," said Ansari, who was recognized as 2nd Runner Up Best Oralist at a premoot hosted by Loyola last month. "I think we would have had a really strong team going, but we're already working on practicing with other schools over Skype. We just have to make sure we enunciate clearly and be careful of connection lags."

"We're already getting used to it," Neace said of the Skype speaking. "Doing the contest virtually is difficult logistically, but it will be better than nothing. The organizers just have a lot of work to do to figure it out," she added.

"We've had to change our practice plan, but it's not entirely new for us," Geoghegan noted. "It's obviously disappointing, since this competition is unlike anything else, but if it goes forward online we'll be very excited to take part. In the big picture, it's definitely better to move it and keep everyone safe."

Neace continued to look on the bright side of the cancellation. "At least we haven't had our lives totally disrupted by the virus like so many other people who've been locked down have. Even if it doesn't go forward it's still been a valuable experience."