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Foreign counsel: Visiting French law students tour county courthouse and jail

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Lt. Joyce Klein of the DeKalb County Sheriff's Office addresses 19 law students from the Université Montesquieu Bordeaux IV in Pessac, France on Wednesday during a tour of the DeKalb County Jail. The students are spending three weeks in Illinois to learn about the differences between the American and French legal systems. KATE WEBER CARLSON | kcarlson@daily-chronicle.com

Yoann Delhaye is not a judge. But that didn't stop the 21-year-old law student from France from sitting Wednesday at the judge's bench in Courtroom 300 at the DeKalb County Courthouse.

Delhaye is one of 19 law students from the Université Montesquieu Bordeaux IV in Pessac who are spending three weeks in Illinois learning about the American legal system. The Northern Illinois University College of Law is hosting the students as they visit DeKalb, Sycamore, Springfield and Chicago.

On Wednesday, the students visited the courthouse and the DeKalb County Jail to hear about the differences between the French and American legal processes as told by those who work within the local system.

"The French system is inquisitorial and the American system is adversarial," Bordeaux Law Professor Jacques Meladeck said Wednesday. "We are in a system where everything is written in books. Our judges have less leeway than your judges."

DeKalb County Circuit Judge Robbin Stuckert said the county Drug Court treatment program is a collective effort with attorneys, law enforcement and the judiciary. The purpose is to find an alternative to the "revolving door" addicts pass through while working through the U.S. legal system, Stuckert said.

"It can be frustrating to see the same people in the courtroom," Stuckert said. "Prison does not address the root problems for a majority of addicts."

DeKalb County State's Attorney Ron Matekaitis said prosecutors wield a great deal of power in court proceedings, since they decide what an arrested person will be charged with.

DeKalb County Public Defender Regina Harris compared differences between the French and American systems for appointing an attorney to a person accused of a crime.

"In France, if a person requests a public defender, then the attorney is there with the person from the beginning," Harris said. "Here, it means the police can't ask any more questions and the judge will later rule to appoint an attorney."

Bordeaux student Barbara Freleteau, 21, said the American legal system in action differs from film portrayals she has seen.

Aside from the discrepancies in legal systems, Freleteau found other differences between France and the U.S.

"Everything is bigger here," she said. "The buildings, the streets, it's all huge."

Comments

Kurt Bechle wrote on **Sep 4, 2008 2:47 PM:**

" Aside from the wider streets and larger buildings, did the students notice that the United States does not, as of yet, have the Orwellian 'hate speech' laws used in France and much of Europe to suppress free inquiry? "