

*SUPERIOR COURT OF SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY*

## **CULTIVATING COMMUNITY AMBASSADORS**

The heart of one of the most significant outreach programs implemented by the Superior Court of San Joaquin County just may have come about because one person lost her way.

In 1999, that same person came to a court-sponsored focus group meeting of the county's Cambodian community. Through an interpreter she told of how she had spent an entire day trying to find the court that was hearing a case involving her son. Since her son was a juvenile, it turned out that the woman was not even in the correct courthouse. "Someone else got up at that meeting," says Judge William J. Murray, Jr., "and said, 'You should have someone who can help people like this woman.'" From that came the beginning of the Court-Community Leadership and Liaison Academy.

The court began the academy the following year as a 12-week program. In recognition of its innovative efforts, the court received the 2001 Ralph N. Kleps Award for Improvement in the Administration of the Courts. The Superior Court of San Joaquin County works with community-based organizations that serve the ethnic, immigrant, and disabled communities across the county and invites them to nominate an employee or volunteer from their organization to attend.

Each year the court asks those in attendance for suggestions on how to improve the program. Based on that input, new topics are added, and the academy has evolved into a 21-week program, split between fall and winter semesters. Once a week, judges and other justice system professionals present a three-hour interactive session. Participants also visit the court clerk's counters, the county law library, the county jail, the county juvenile hall, and even the Court of Appeal, Third Appellate District, to see the courts in action and experience the impact of court operations.

Academy graduates serve for two years as liaisons to the community and agree to reconvene for discussions if and when the need arises. One unexpected outgrowth of the program: graduates began networking outside the court, which strengthened the interaction of the service organizations in the community. "You can't reach everybody," says Judge Murray. "But the people you do reach go back into the community and have a multiplier effect."

The court also has a Youth Leadership Academy for high school students, which evolved from its mentorship program. Currently, it is a five-week summer program, but the court is planning to make it available year-round.

When it was once again time to begin strategic planning, the court made valuable use of the relationships it built over the years. Using its CwC grant, San Joaquin conducted 28 focus groups with community groups, justice system partners, and court users (including former jurors and ex-offenders). Nearly 400 people participated. The court also distributed four different surveys and collected more than 2,000 responses. This valuable input from the community was used to develop the court's new mission statement, issue statements, strategic goals, operational objectives, and new programming. A summary of the focus group comments and an analysis of the survey results, including a comparison with the court's 1999 survey results, will be published and made available to the focus group participants, local governmental leaders, and the public.

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*—Judge William J. Murray, Jr.*



Judge William J. Murray, Jr. (left, first row), shown with the 2005 graduating class of the Superior Court of San Joaquin County's Court-Community Leadership and Liaison Academy.