



Celebrating 25 Years: Marshall Dennehey's 2025 Advanced Trial Advocacy & Mock Trial Program participants included (front row, left to right): Sean Reeves, Lauren Purcell, David Drake, Christian Weimann, Elias Hassinger, Heather LaBombardi, and Corey Setterlund. Faculty included (back row, left to right): James Hanratty, Craig Hudson, Dan Sherry, Thomas Brophy, Joan Orsini Ford, and Joseph Santarone.

# Marshall Dennehey's Advanced Trial Advocacy & Mock Trial Program Turns 25

## Celebrating a Quarter-Century of Trial Training Excellence

By Butler Buchanan, III

**2025** marked the 25th anniversary of Marshall Dennehey's Advanced Trial Advocacy & Mock Trial Program—an in-house initiative that has helped shape some of our firm's most confident and capable trial lawyers.

What began as a novel idea sparked by military experience has become a cornerstone of our attorney training program,

designed to instill real-world courtroom skills and build lasting professional relationships.

### The Origin Story

The idea for the mock trial program began taking shape after Christopher Dougherty, the then-Director of our Professional Liability Department and also a Marine Corps officer, spent two weeks each summer in the West Pacific serving on trial teams and teaching younger Judge Advocate Generals (JAGs) trial skills based on the National Institute for Trial

Advocacy (NITA) method. “After the second year,” Chris recalls, “I realized that this is something we can replicate at Marshall Dennehey.”

He brought the idea to Executive Committee member and future CEO, Thomas Brophy, a long-time champion of attorney development. “We needed more formalized training,” said Tom. “At that time, insurance companies were increasingly adding staff counsel or general counsel positions which reduced the number of smaller cases assigned to us. We knew we had to step up our training efforts so our attorneys would be prepared for increasingly selective case assignments—even arbitrations, which were seeing rising stakes.”

Tom credits Chris with being the driving force behind the program. “Chris deserves 95% of the credit,” he said. “He brought the military training model and combined it with the NITA framework to create something uniquely Marshall Dennehey.”

### **Building the Program**

The first mock trial case was adapted from a real employment law matter involving allegations of sexual harassment in a restaurant. Employment attorneys Tom DeLorenzo and Ronda O’Donnell contributed to the creation of the case’s fact pattern, and the firm followed the NITA model to structure it.

The curriculum was divided into four key trial segments:

- Opening Statements
- Direct Examination
- Cross Examination
- Closing Arguments

Chris served as the judge for many years, and the faculty roster was deep and impressive—Bob Goggin, Jack Penders, Dan Sherry, Scott Gemberling, Lary Zucker, and many others. In later years, seasoned attorneys like Mike Turner, Joe Santarone, Chris Santoro, Robin Snyder,

Paul Laughlin, Craig Hudson, Sunny Sparano, and Kevin Hexstall—some of whom had gone through the program themselves—joined the faculty ranks.

Expert witnesses were drawn from internal departments like billing, accounting, and IT. Eventually, the firm began hiring professional actors—an element that continues today. Summer law clerks continue to serve as jurors, gaining a front-row seat to the courtroom experience.

### **Selecting Participants**

Each year, 8 to 12 participants are selected from across the firm—typically attorneys who have reached the stage in their career where they will be taking cases to trial. Department Directors nominate these individuals, looking for attorneys with a strong work ethic who demonstrate skills or personality traits conducive to becoming effective trial lawyers. The group often forms tight bonds throughout the program which helps to develop connections between attorneys from various offices.

“The mock trial isn’t just about teaching trial skills,” said Tom. “It’s about identifying future leaders and building relationships across practice groups and offices.”

### **The Mock Trial Courtroom**

In its early years, the program was held at Temple Law School and then off-site in hotels to eliminate distractions. But when the firm moved its Philadelphia headquarters office from Walnut Street to Market Street, the IT Training Room was designed to double as a mock trial courtroom, complete with a judge’s bench, witness stand, and jury box that could be configured as needed.

### **Growing Pains and Lasting Lessons**

The program is rigorous—demanding hours, tough critiques, and the ever-dreaded video playback sessions. Chris always told participants, “You’ll be cri-

tiqued in front of your peers. Wear a thick skin.”

But the payoff was—and remains—worth it.

“People would say, ‘This is the hardest, most rewarding thing I’ve ever done,’” Chris shared. “They were told to take chances and not rely on their legal pads. And every year, someone surprises us.”

“We’ve seen attorneys who seem quiet and reserved deliver stunning opening statements,” said Tom. “Others reveal an unexpected competitive edge. Watching the transformation from one day to the other is remarkable. Confidence builds, and real growth happens.”

“The mock trial program gives our attorneys the confidence to get into the courtroom,” said Chris. “That’s what it’s all about.”

### **Looking Ahead**

As the program celebrates its 25th anniversary, Craig Hudson, former Director of Marshall Dennehey’s Professional Liability Department, reflected on the milestone. “The mock trial program remains a testament to the firm’s commitment to hands-on training, excellence in advocacy, and the belief that great trial lawyers aren’t just born—they’re built, supported, and encouraged,” he said. “Congratulations to all who have helped make the program what it is today—and to those who will carry it forward for the next 25 years.”



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