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## **CURIOUS ABOUT COURT**

13-year-old spends summer break watching court trials

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**BETTER THAN DISNEYLAND:** Academy for Academic Excellence student Luke Rodriguez, 13, of Apple Valley, has sat through an entire murder trial for the past two weeks during his summer break. He wrote a letter to Judge John Tomberlin and obtained permission to be in the courtroom, since children under 18 years old are not allowed to attend court hearings.

**VICTORVILLE •** Luke Rodriguez isn't a typical 13-year-old — he said he'd rather sit in a courtroom than go to Disneyland.

On his summer break from the Academy for Academic Excellence, Luke has been visiting the Victorville courthouse to watch jury trials and hearings to satisfy his passion for the law.

"I'd rather be here," than a theme park, Luke said, sitting in a courtroom. "I don't like the crowd."

The Apple Valley teenager, whose favorite TV show is "Law & Order," said he wants to become a prosecutor to keep dangerous people off the streets.

He can talk nonstop about penal codes, Assembly bills and differences between California and New York sentencing laws. In his free time, he researches laws on the Internet and checks the San Bernardino Superior Court website.

His father, a parole agent, has been dropping him off at the courthouse before 9 a.m. and picking him up in the evening for the past few weeks.

“I was excited when he decided to go there,” his father, Joe Rodriguez, said. “He’s driven by that. It’s really unique. You don’t see a 12- or 13-year-old kid that has so much passion in what he loves.”

Rodriguez took his son to a misdemeanor trial for one day last year, and since then the eighth-grader had kept bugging him to take him to the courthouse again.

“I had to tell him, ‘Kid, slow down. You’re scaring me,’ ” Rodriguez said.

Generally, judges don’t allow people under 18 in their courtroom. So Luke wrote a letter to Victorville Supervising Judge John Tomberlin to get permission, telling Tomberlin he wants to learn about courts.

Thus the teen got to watch the entire trial of two men charged with the 2004 kidnapping and murder of a Victorville man from the very front seat in Tomberlin’s courtroom for the past two weeks.

“As a supervising judge of this courthouse, I don’t want the public to believe that children can’t be here for sincere educational interest,” Tomberlin said.

But the judge didn’t forget there can be R-rated material in court. Tomberlin ordered Rodriguez to leave his courtroom Wednesday during the hearing of a rape case.

When Luke returns home from the courthouse, he talks to his family about what happened in the trial.

“It’s like a kid coming back from Disneyland,” Rodriguez said.

Luke said he started learning about the legal system when he found out that he can look up the criminal history of anyone on the San Bernardino County court website. He also has an uncle and aunt who are public defenders in Los Angeles County and a cousin who is a prosecutor in New York.

Rodriguez said his son knows more about the law than parole agents in his office.

“He’s sharp when it comes to academics,” Rodriguez said. “He’d rather have conversation with adults than kids.” Luke took a practice Law School Admission Test and beat his two older brothers, one of whom attends University of California, Irvine, Rodriguez said. Unfortunately, he has to go back to school Monday. “I’m gonna try to be back here during school year,” he said with a smirk.

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