Court team places first

(left to right) Elijah Yip, Kanani Kikami, Paul Tanaka and assistant professor Denise Antoloni
by Leila Fujimori
Ka Leo Staff Writer

The University of Hawai‘i law school’s team took first place in the National Environmental Law Moot Court Competition held in New York.

The team of Elijah Yip, Ka‘ulani Kidani and Paul Tanaka triumphed over 67 other teams from around the country. Pace University Law School sponsored the competition which lasted from Feb. 18 to 20.

The event “is like the Super Bowl, the ultimate head-to-head competition” for environmental law students, said their coach, Denise Antolini.

Unlike other mock trial competitions that have preliminary regional contests, this was a single three-day tournament to determine the national champion: Antolini, UH assistant professor, said Hawai‘i faced formidable opponents, such as Georgetown University and the University of Michigan.

In the final round, Hawai‘i beat out the University of Texas School of Law and the University of California’s Hastings School of Law.

This team was the first from the William S. Richardson School of Law to win this national championship. Yip and Kidani, third-year law students, received individual awards for best orals in both preliminary and semifinal rounds. Yip and Kidani were part of last year’s team, which made it to the quarterfinals. Their experience helped.

Actual federal court judges and individuals from the Environmental Protection Agency were among the judges at the event.

Kidani said the competition was held in a large auditorium where the judges sat high, wearing robes, and an audience of more than 200 watched, which added to the pressure.

The win came as a shock. Kidani and Antolini were in tears when the announcement was made. But the victory was especially “sweet” for Kidani because of the compliments the team members received from their opponents.

Each team prepared written briefs and oral arguments from different positions in a mock case. The case involved an environmental group suing a corporation for contaminating a river and a state agency in charge of pollution control.

After the semifinal round in which the UH team argued one position, UH was tapped as a finalist and had 45 minutes to prepare its arguments from a different position. The three UH law students had prepared since last October, and Antolini said their hard work showed. But what was truly rewarding to her from a teacher’s perspective was to see them “absorbing things from the competition” and improving during the competition.

“They were really gracious, poised and very professional with that wonderful Hawaiian-style approach,” Antolini said. “The judges really enjoyed them. They had the judges laughing.”

Yip, who argued six of the six rounds, attributed the win to having a confident attitude, doing their best and their prior experience. Yip said his speech and debate experience at McKinley High School and coaching also helped him as an oralist.

The team also credited Antolini, a former environmental law attorney, for helping them. “This was her specialty,” Kidani said. “She just put everything into perspective for us and said to think ‘this is your client. I think we really believed in it the most and we had a real conversational tone.’”

However, coaches in this competition were barred from giving any help in writing briefs and helping in the actual preparation.

The success in the competition may have changed Kidani’s future goals. “I think I saw a new side of myself,” she said. She said she never saw herself as a litigator, but now may decide to take up litigation instead of real estate law. Upon graduation, she will work for the law firm of Cades, Schutte, Fleming & Wright.

After graduating, Yip will join the Cades firm practicing civil litigation after clerking for Judge Samuel King.

Antolini practiced environmental law for two years in Seattle, then six years in Hawai‘i with the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund before joining the UH law school. She began coaching the team in fall 1996.

Associate Professor Casey Jarman founded the school’s environmental law program eight years ago. She served as coach for five years before Antolini.

The environmental law program is one of two main specialized areas in which UH law students can obtain certificates.