

## AND JUSTICE FOR ALL

By *Naseem Stecker*

Scene one sets the stage: a courtroom in a bustle as preparations for trial begin. The civil case before the judge and mostly white jury involves the alleged wrongful death of a 16-year-old African-American homosexual from an immigrant family.

Taped as short video vignettes by WKAR in East Lansing, these fictional scenarios will help spearhead communication on open justice issues at a roundtable discussion to be held in May 2001 and to be moderated by University of Michigan president, Lee Bollinger.

The hour-long video is a special project undertaken by the Public Information and Education Committee of the Open Justice Commission. The aim of the project is to show that prejudice exists, the potential impact of such bias in court proceedings, and the ways our system of justice can and should respond. It will also be the basis for high school civics classes.

Scripted for television by attorney and State Bar of Michigan Open Justice consultant Lorraine Weber, the vignettes are based on the findings of various Supreme Court Task Forces and the follow-up report by the State Bar in 1998. The issues that will be highlighted include racial, ethnic, and gender bias as well as disabilities and sexual orientation and the effect of those factors on a case.

"These findings show that race and gender both impact people's perceptions and their experience of the legal system," Weber said. "What the committee tried to do was to combine all the information that we have in a fairly intense package for

the purposes of the program—to create a backdrop for thoughtful/critical discussion of the problems. These are complex issues and not always easy to resolve."

Discussion topics will revolve around subjects like how a jury is selected, composition of the jury pool, gender and accessibility, sexual orientation, the rights of citizens and noncitizens, victim's responsibilities as well as cultural questions.

Sue Carter, a journalism professor at Michigan State University, who is a member of the Open Justice Information and Education Committee, said the visual medium works very well for teaching and illustrating these topics. "This subject matter

lends itself well to showing instances where subtle and not so subtle barriers exist to equal treatment."

Richard Jewell, adjunct faculty member of MSU's School of Criminal Justice, who also acts in the video presentation, says the script "deals with people's perceptions, stereotypes, and prejudices. This project brings to light how those impact people's lives. It helps to open the eyes of our justice system to how we sometimes treat people

with no malicious intent but sadly the end result is prejudice. I am very happy to be a part of something that helps manifest a paradigm shift in people's thinking."

The video project was funded by a State Bar Foundation grant of over \$30,000. The State Bar of Michigan has funded the commission and the project's administrative costs. The program will air in the summer or early fall, on all public television stations in the state. ♦

*Naseem Stecker is a staff writer for the Michigan Bar Journal.*



*Short video vignettes were taped in December at WKAR in East Lansing.*