

Making Meaning from the Past

A Program Inspires Students with History



BY CATHY GORN

On May 11, 1974, 127 students from middle and high schools in the greater Cleveland area gathered on the campus of Case Western Reserve University to compete in a contest called “History Day.” The idea was the brainchild of David Van Tassel, a professor of history at Case Western, who wanted, he said, “to counter the devaluation of history as a field of study in the aftermath of the cry for ‘relevance’ during the 1960s.”

Van Tassel had witnessed a generation of young people caught up in events during one of the most turbulent decades in American history, who felt that past events were irrelevant to their lives. He wanted to create a tool to invigorate the teaching and learning of history—to make history education exciting, interesting, and

relevant. He believed that future citizens must learn to look at current issues through the prism of history to understand both their cause and effect.

His idea would evolve into National History Day (NHD),* a nonprofit organization based in College Park, Maryland, of which I am the executive director. While NHD offers academic and professional development opportunities as well as curriculum materials throughout the year, it is widely known for the National History Day Contest, in which students conduct historical research and submit their projects at local and state levels, with top students invited to the National Contest.

Watching students compete this year prompted me to reflect on the uncertain times we face today. Although history does not repeat itself exactly, many educators still share Van Tassel’s concern as we continue to see how harmful an ignorance of history

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*To learn more about National History Day, visit www.nhd.org.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GABY D’ALESSANDRO

and a lack of historical perspective can be.*

In an era rife with accusations of “fake news”[†] and conflicts that at times have turned violent, it is ever more important that young people are taught to examine current events through a historical perspective and to back up their assertions and interpretations with solid evidence. Many recent events, including the clash between protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, have shown how a misunderstanding or lack of historical knowledge can lead to dire consequences for our country.

The study of the past helps us make sense of the present and provides students with an understanding of who we are as a people and as a society, and the continuing challenges we face to preserve and protect democracy. In the current political climate, understanding history and its consequences is crucial. But such a study must go beyond memorizing names and dates and reading textbooks. Studying history should spark curiosity and prompt students to ask why and how, in addition to what, where, and when. Those questions deserve legitimate answers, ones backed by evidence. “Because I know how to question, I believe I am a better citizen of this country,” as one student put it in a paper detailing her project for the National Contest. “No blind faith or cynicism for me! History has made me see a strong connection between our past and our future.”

Participation in NHD demonstrates that students learn history when they extensively research and write about it. The NHD contest is not a secondary school version of Trivial Pursuit. It is not a “bee” in which students memorize information that they later recite in response to questions. Rather, it requires that they thoroughly and deliberately examine the world of the past through direct contact with original materials, including documents, photographs, film, newspapers, interviews, and visits to historic sites, such as battlefields, monuments, and memorials. By engaging with such resources, students can understand the motivations of individuals who lived in a particular time and place, why past events unfolded as they did, and how they continue to shape the present.

Understanding History— and National History Day

Although the National History Day Contest is what NHD is most known for, activities and events sponsored by NHD take place all year. To be eligible for the National Contest, which occurs at the University of Maryland every June, students in sixth through twelfth grades first choose a topic in history, based on an annual theme.[‡]

* For more on how history instructs, see “History and Tyranny” in the Summer 2017 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/summer2017/snyder.

† For more on fake news, see “The Challenge That’s Bigger Than Fake News” in the Fall 2017 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/fall2017/mcgrew_ortega_breakstone_wineburg.

‡ For more on contest themes, visit www.nhd.org/previous-annual-themes.

Each year, NHD staff members select a theme to guide student research. While themes are broad, they are also narrow enough to help focus students. The 2017 theme was “Taking a Stand in History,” and this year’s is “Conflict and Compromise in History.”

To enter the contest, students conduct research in libraries, archives, and museums. After thinking critically about the topic’s significance, students present their evidence and conclusions in their choice of a paper, exhibit, performance, documentary, or website. Many schools have clubs, or even classes, that help students in the creation and revision of projects.

The completed projects are entered into competition at local and state levels where they are evaluated by professional historians and educators. Top entries then move on to the national competi-



tion, where similar panels of judges evaluate their work. Projects are evaluated on historical quality, relationship to the contest theme, and clarity of presentation. The best projects combine excellent research with a strong argument supported by evidence.

Of the more than half a million students who create projects each year, only around 3,000 make it to the National Contest. More than \$100,000 in prizes and scholarships are awarded, including first-, second-, and third-place prizes, as well as special prizes to entries that focus on specific areas of historical research. The largest prizes are three college scholarships, including a full tuition scholarship to Case Western Reserve University, where NHD was founded.

One reason why the contest motivates so many students is that it allows young people to take ownership of their learning. They choose their own topics and chart their own research plans. As long as students can show their topic’s significance in history and back it up with solid evidence, they can choose from local, state, national, or world history. The program provides an opportunity for students to develop the knowledge and skills that are an inherent part of authentic assessment.

Every year, NHD students remind us that young people have not yet become jaded by the world. They believe in fairness and come fresh to their topics. They find primary sources that allow the historical figures to speak for themselves, using evidence to support their conclusions about their topic’s significance. In this way, students find the antecedents that shed light on today’s issues, as several students

did when the contest theme in 1998 was “Migration in History.”

The concept of migration prompted many students to look at the historical impacts of immigration. For instance, Juan and Guadalupe Medina, brothers from Houston, focused on a topic that was close to home: the agricultural guest worker (bracero) program established during World War II. Their documentary about the program explained how, as a result of a labor shortage, millions of Mexican citizens were brought to work on U.S. farms. During their research, the Medinas discovered that their own grandfather, Manuel Cruz, came to the United States as a bracero and stayed. After winning first place at the National Contest, Guadalupe said his research made him realize that as the descendent of Mexican immigrants, “I have a right to be here as much as anybody, because I can see the struggle our ancestors went through to help the United States.”

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Because many students like the Medinas have a personal stake in their topics, contest participants often continue their historical research after the competition. In fact, many make it their lifelong goal to pursue justice and tell the stories of those whom history may have forgotten.

In 2000, when the NHD theme was “Turning Points in History,” four students from Uniontown, Kansas, helped bring long-overdue recognition to a World War II hero and ultimately influenced the teaching of the Holocaust in Polish schools. In the fall of 1999, the students uncovered the forgotten story of Irena Sendler, a non-Jewish social worker in Warsaw who saved more than 2,500 children from the Jewish ghetto.

At great personal risk, Sendler talked Jewish parents into giving up their children, as they would surely die otherwise. She smuggled the children out of the ghetto in body bags, claiming that they had died of typhoid. She then changed the children’s names and placed them in non-Jewish homes. She wrote their real names on pieces of paper that she placed in jars and buried in her yard, with the hope that when the world was free of evil, she would dig them up and tell the children about their true identities. Although Sendler was arrested by the Nazis and severely beaten, she was rescued from prison when a colleague bribed a guard to release her.

The students discovered that Sendler was still alive, and with the help of a Polish student at a local college, the group wrote letters to Sendler, who was 91 years old, and received letters from

her in return. The students wrote a performance for their National History Day entry, which took them to the National Contest. But it did not end there. The students, with the help of the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, started a trust at a Polish bank in Warsaw and raised money for Sendler’s care. After the national competition, the students continued to present their performance to community groups in Kansas, New York City, and Washington, D.C.

In 2001, the students and their teacher, Norm Conard, flew to Poland to meet their hero, returning several times. Even today, their work continues. In 2007, Conard helped found the Lowell Milken Center for Unsung Heroes in Fort Scott, Kansas. As the center’s director, Conard works with program director Megan Felt (one of his students from the Sendler project), teaching educators and students worldwide about tolerance and respect.

Because of their efforts, Irena Sendler’s name and contribution to history are known throughout the world. The Hallmark Channel produced a television movie about Sendler. And the book *Life in a Jar: The Irena Sendler Project* tells the story of Sendler’s heroism and how the students from Kansas discovered her story. Although Sendler was recognized for her efforts by Israel’s Yad Vashem Holocaust museum in 1965, her story was buried under communist rule in Poland. But because of the efforts of a National History Day project, Sendler’s story came to light.

The Critical Role of History Teachers

Teachers are the backbone of the NHD program. While a large number teach social studies, many also teach English language arts, graphic design, media production, art, music, and drama. School librarians also provide a critical role, helping students access and interpret sources.

They provide the resources and guidance students need to master a historical topic.[§]

NHD changes the way that teachers approach their classrooms; many integrate the program into their curriculum. By providing students opportunities to make choices—for instance, what topic to select, what project to create, and whether to work independently or in a group—educators use the program as a vehicle to drive student learning and engagement

Nick Coddington, an NHD teacher from Washington state now studying at Columbia University, recalls how the program captivated a high school freshman student named Taylor. Passionate about horses, Taylor wanted to study the Great Horse Manure Crisis of 1894. Coddington was skeptical. But Taylor focused on the political and technological reforms that helped to clean up American cities. Coddington was impressed, especially when Taylor’s project made it to the finals at the National Contest. “The lesson to me was that by letting students pick their own topic, they end up learning more than they otherwise would have and learn to love history,” he says. “I also enjoy it because I get to learn about topics in history that I was oblivious to.”

As students begin researching and their projects progress, teachers’ roles start to shift. Rather than simply providing infor-

[§]For more on the role of librarians in supporting student research, see “Beyond the Stacks” in the Winter 2014–2015 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/winter2014-2015/freeman.

mation, they work with librarians to teach students how to find the information themselves. Dave Wheeler, an NHD teacher in Indianapolis, encourages students to look at the big picture in order to understand their chosen topic. Students learn “to take into consideration some of the larger issues of that time period that may have had an impact or influence on their topic,” he says. In addition, this process “allows them to start focusing on more specific aspects of the research process.”

Wheeler also supports students in strengthening their thesis statements and improving their argumentation and analytical skills. He notes that working this way can be accomplished with students at any level and at any grade; he has supported students in their NHD projects in general education classes as well as honors and Advanced Placement courses.

Other teachers use the contest as a way to improve written and spoken language. Carol Dallman, an NHD teacher from Minnesota who teaches at a high school for English language learners, notes that NHD helps students pace themselves through a large project and learn technological skills such as accessing research databases. In addition, students “learn the vocabulary of academics—citation, bibliography, annotation, credible sources—and they learn how to use an academic library.” She adds that participation in the contest provides them a chance to compare their work with the work of students of different backgrounds. In doing so, “they find their work is just as good, providing a great boost to confidence.”

Al Wheat, a teacher from Mississippi, recalls how an NHD project engaged LaVontae, a shy student who “didn’t say more than 10 words his first year in my class.” LaVontae used his video editing skills in an NHD group that produced a documentary. When his group was invited to make a presentation of the project at a Mississippi legislative session, LaVontae was the only member who could go. Wheat says that despite his quiet manner in class, LaVontae did a terrific job presenting the group’s project and “overwhelmingly impressed” the representatives.

Wheat says that LaVontae now uses the documentary and video editing skills he developed for the NHD project for his YouTube channel, which has more than 20,000 subscribers with more than 13 million views. “NHD took an extremely introverted, shy child that all statistics said should be struggling, and possibly even failing, and changed him,” Wheat says. “He’s now excelling in college, has excelled in large public presentations, and is clearly excelling in video creation and editing. LaVontae is one of my many NHD success stories, and one that continues to make me proud.”

National History Day Works

While the stories above are powerful, documented evidence of student success further demonstrates National History Day’s effectiveness. In 2009, NHD commissioned a professional evaluation that validated 40 years of anecdotal evidence: the historical research that is part of the program helps transform young people into scholars.

With funding from the Behring Global Education Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education, NHD hired an independent research organization to explore the impact of the program. The evaluation, conducted during the 2009–2010 school year, found the following:

- **NHD students outperform their non-NHD peers on standardized tests in all topic areas, including reading, science, and math, as well as social studies.** For example, in Texas, NHD students outperformed their non-NHD peers on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills tests, and not just in history but in science and math as well.
- **NHD students in South Carolina outperformed their non-NHD peers on English assessments.** NHD high school students led their school district with a 61 percent passing rate in English, 1 to 9 percent above a comparison site.
- **NHD students are better writers, meaning that they write with a purpose and real voice, and that they marshal solid evidence to support their points of view.** NHD students had more exemplary writing scores and fewer low scores than comparison students. Overall, NHD students outscored comparison-group students on both pre- and post-writing assessments, receiving more exemplary scores (5 or 6) on a six-point scale.

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- **NHD students are critical thinkers who can digest, analyze, and synthesize information.** Performance assessments show that NHD students scored 18 percentage points better than their peers at interpreting historical information, earning an average of 79 percent correct, compared with 61 percent.

The study provides solid evidence that history education matters and that high-quality history education, such as the kind National History Day provides, plays a central part in helping young people gain a well-rounded understanding of our global community and the knowledge and skills necessary for their future success. Equally important, studying the past has a positive effect on civic involvement, especially voting. This study also shows that young people who are exposed to high-quality history education are more likely to vote, volunteer, and take part in their communities.

Ultimately, National History Day prepares young people to become productive and engaged citizens. By conducting extensive primary research at libraries, archives, and museums, hundreds of thousands of young people each year engage in rigorous explorations of history. And each year, these students learn that to fully understand the present, they must first find meaning in the past. □