



We The People

by John D. Whitaker

I spend a fair amount of time helping young people who are in legal trouble. After a while, it really begins to seem like there is a serious problem with the teenagers in this county when you see a large group of them all lined up at the courthouse waiting for their cases to be called. It is important to remember that most kids are not in any trouble. In fact, they are doing amazing things that are not always recognized.

Never has this point been made clearer for me than this last month when I was asked to be a judge in the national "We The People" competition in Washington, D.C. This competition is directed by the Center for Civic Education and funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The competition was established by an Act of Congress in 1987. I have been judging at the state level for a number of years, and it was a great honor to be asked to go to Washington for the finals.

The program consists of high school students studying the history surrounding the U.S. Constitution in order to examine its relevance to contemporary issues. The culminating activity consists of a simulated congressional hearing where the teams are asked specific questions involving various constitutional issues. The teams then respond with an opening statement in response to the question. Then the three-judge panel asks the team questions to evaluate the level of the teams cumulative understanding of the constitutional principles raised in the question. The hearings are conducted just like a congressional hearing and the teams are then given scores based upon the teams' technical knowledge, understanding, presentation and group participation.

Each state selects a team to send to the nationals. The state competition took place in December of last year and most high schools in the state had teams. Cheyenne Central High School won the Wyoming state competition, and represented Wyoming well at the Nationals in Washington. This type of training is



invaluable to assist the students in preparing for college. According to the Center for Civic Education Web site, several studies conducted by the Educational Testing Service and Stanford University indicates that students who participated in the program "significantly outperformed comparison students" on the topics studied. Since inception, some 28 million students have participated in the program with the help of some 90,000 educators.

The quality of the presentations at the national level was amazing. It can be very difficult to get up in front of 75-100 people and be questioned about some complicated constitutional issue. Yet team

after team was able to provide polished presentations and respond to complicated questions. The teams are provided a list of three possible opening questions and they are expected to be able to respond to each question. However, no warning is provided about the follow-up questions raised by the judges. Watching these talented young people think their way through follow-up questions was absolutely fascinating. Our questions were designed to make them think out loud, and the quality of the responses reaffirmed my faith in the upcoming millennium generation.

I don't want it to sound like all these talented young people were just odd little supercomputers. They were smart, funny, polite, creative kids, just like the ones living in your basement. If you have a high school student at your house, I would strongly urge you to have them look into this valuable program.

The real contrast between the past and present occurred during a break, when I went to the National Archives to see the Declaration of Independence. As I was looking at this magnificent document, I noticed two young ladies standing beside me. Their coach said they were from Atlanta. When they noticed John Hancock's prominent signature on the Declaration one said to the other "Wow, look at that, John Hancock, he's my home dog!" I am pretty sure that John Hancock never dreamed that he was going to become someone's "home dog" 231 years after he signed the Declaration, but I bet he would approve.

The Wyoming State Bar does not certify any lawyer as a specialist or expert. Anyone considering a lawyer should independently investigate the lawyer's credentials and ability, and not rely upon advertisements or self-proclaimed expertise. This informative column is brought to you by John Whitaker who practices personal injury and criminal law throughout Wyoming. He can be reached at jw@wyojinjury.com or by calling his office in Casper at 265-6204.