

American Legion contests engage youth

Essay and speech competitions among ways group stokes students' interest in democracy

By Ken Knutson

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Rohan Chadha believes America will truly thrive as the world's leading democracy if its citizenry is educated on current affairs and endeavors to understand all sides of an issue.

Oh, and have respect for the rule of law.

"Those are the most important responsibilities," said Rohan, a Gower Middle School eighth-grader and winner of this year's essay contest sponsored by Hinsdale American Legion Post 250.

Chadha's social studies teacher encouraged his students to participate in the contest to write a 500-word essay on "What are my responsibilities as a U.S. Citizen?"

"I was a little bit surprised, and I'm honored," he said of earning the top prize. "I'm glad that I won first place."

Post 250 Adjutant Tom Lynch said the contest, open to local students in middle school and high school, seeks to promote Americanism among youth. In his four years overseeing the contest, he said the children's submissions never cease to impress him.

"They are head and shoulders above where we were in school. They're attuned to certain things that just surprise me. I always learn a lot from their essays," he said. "The most rewarding thing about the essay contest is the diversity of what the kids write about."

The judging panel for the 12 submissions included a retired principal and two area teachers along with members of the legion.

"We rate them on a scale of 1 to 10," Lynch explained. "We take the top four highest scores that we get and then pick the best out of those."

Chadha received a nice \$25 prize for his achievement. His essay was also forwarded on to the district level, after which it could advance to the division level. The first place prize there is \$200. Not too shabby.

The post also held its annual speech contest at the end of March for seventh- and eighth-graders. Two students took part, selecting an aspect of the U.S. Constitution on which to expound for four minutes. Hinsdale Middle School seventh-grader Brandon Walker chose voting, leading with this quote by Dr. Martin Luther King: "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

"The point of the speech was to discuss voting and the way Americans need to exercise their right to vote," Brandon said, noting how studies show growing apathy among the younger set. "It does concern me. I think it's strange that people don't vote because they



Hinsdale Middle School seventh-grader Brandon Walker's speech in March on the importance of voting as part of the American Legion speech contest captured first-place honors at the district level. (Jim Slonoff photo)

were given the right to vote for a reason, to show what they do and don't agree with."

Brandon won \$75 for his second-place finish locally. With some guidance from the judges, he polished his delivery at the district competition and took home the \$200 first place reward.

"The judges told me to project my voice and enunciate more," he said. "I wasn't expecting to win because there were eighth-graders a year older than me. So it did feel pretty good as a seventh-grader."

What became of the prize money?

"I bought airpods," Brandon revealed.

For high school students, the American Legion sponsors an oratorical contest. Post 250 didn't have any takers among its schools this year. Lynch laments the sagging participation in the contests, which he attributes to an ambivalence toward military-related groups.

"Some of the schools think because we're a paramilitary organization, they think everything that we do is based around the military," he said. "The legion is out to help the community and the youth and the veterans."

A few years back a Hinsdale Central student entered in the annual poppy poster contest to create the image that will be used for the American Legion's annual Memorial Day fundraiser. She won first place in the state and received

\$500, in addition to having her work displayed all across Illinois.

"It's amazing to work with these kids and see what they're doing and their talents," Lynch said, reiterating the education that the contests are for him and fellow judges. "There isn't a person that walks out of that room that doesn't say, 'We didn't know this! They're teaching us.'"

Rohan said he hopes his peers become more engaged in their civic duties as they mature and eventually reach voting age.

"People think that a singular person can't make a difference," he said, citing razor-thin election margins to dispute that mentality. "I wanted to write about that — being open-minded and being aware of worldwide affairs. Mostly kids today don't know what's going on in the world. Most of them they don't know who their senator or representatives in Congress are."

After all, previous generations didn't give up on this democracy, he suggested. On the contrary, hundreds of thousands lost their lives to preserve it. He expressed appreciation for veterans, all they have sacrificed and all they continue to contribute to the community through groups like the American Legion.

"I've met many veterans before," he said. "They're just really nice people and I just have a massive respect for them."

■ MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Making a Difference is a partnership between The Hinsdalean and the American Legion Post 250 in Hinsdale, whose mission is to support veterans and their families, the community, youth and the programs of the national organization.

Winning words

This essay by Gower Middle School eighth grader Rohan Chadha on "What are my responsibilities as a U.S. Citizen?" captured first place in the American Legion Post 250 essay contest:

Responsibilities are the only things that keep people from going into chaos. Some people think that the freedom of our responsibilities will lead us to a happier and better America.

However, America cannot give its citizens too much freedom. This would make people not want to work, which would hurt the economy a ton. This is why the Constitution gives us the perfect balance of freedoms and responsibilities. The most important responsibilities include being open-minded, to stay informed of what is going on in the world and to follow the law, because these responsibilities will help America strive forward as a country.

From the beginning to the middle of the 19th century, America was divided between the North and the South. Most of the North were abolitionists, and the South was mostly slave owners. At this time, people say that America has never been more divided. However, some would argue that America right now is more divided than America in the 1800s. We classify ourselves by our political party, and we refuse to listen to others' opinions. This why it is my responsibility as an American to stay open-minded toward others' opinions. If we become a more understanding community, we can become peaceful, and we would be more respectful toward one another.

A second responsibility of mine is to not be ignorant of local and worldwide affairs. Most teenagers in America don't even know the names of the U.S. senators. If Americans become more and more ignorant, they

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POLICE BEAT

Hinsdale police distributed the following reports April 30.

DUI arrest

Thomas W. McCann, 37, 5831 W. 26th St., No. 2E, Cicero, was arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol, driving with a blood alcohol level higher than .08 and leaving the scene of a personal injury accident at 7:16 p.m. April 28 after police were dispatched to a hit and run crash at 55th Street and County Line Road. Police located the suspect and his vehicle at Pinecrest Drive and Plainfield Road in Burr Ridge. He was charged and released to appear in court.

Identity theft cases reported

- The identity of a resident of the 200 block of Ravine Road was used to open a cell phone account between 8 and 9 a.m. April 26.
- The identity of a resident of the 500 block of West Hickory Street was used to forge a fraudulent check on April 15. The incident was reported April 26

Items stolen from store

An employee of Walgreens, 15 Grant Square, witnessed two suspects leave the store without paying for about \$80 worth of merchandise at 1:20 p.m. April 25.

Chadha's winning words

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will care less about what is going on around the world. There would be fewer protests and less change in America, which could possibly lead to an oppressive government. This is not what America stands for. This is why it is very important to stay informed about what's going on. It is my responsibility to stay informed about the world, so America can constantly improve and grow. Our founding fathers gave us the many freedoms that we have today, and our knowledge of the world will keep these freedoms safe.

Finally, a major responsibility that I have is to follow the laws. Laws are what keeps people in check, and we must follow them to become a cooperative community. Criminals are taking America a step backwards in reaching this

goal. These people have caused anarchy, destruction, death and so much more. If I follow the laws, I am contributing to the welfare of America. If everyone does the same, America will be a better place.

To conclude, the most important civic duties that America have includes being thoughtful to the ideas of others, being aware of worldwide affairs and following the law. Some people don't think that what they do matters a lot. They think that one person can't make a difference. That is why they might not follow through with their responsibilities. However, if 1 million people think this, that is 1 million people not doing their responsibilities. This is why I do my duties as an American citizen. People need to realize that anyone can make an impact and that what they do matters.

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