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Winners of VFW Essay Contest Announced

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Evanston Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post 7186 has announced the outcome of the 2020 student essay scholarship competitions.

The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) started the Voice of Democracy Scholarship program in 1947. The VFW became a national sponsor in the late 1950s and assumed sole responsibility for the program in 1961. The competition was created to provide students in grades 9 through 12 the opportunity to express themselves regarding democratic ideas and principles. This year's theme was "Is this the Country the Founders Envisioned?" Students recorded a three-to-five-minute audio essay, which was graded on originality, content, and delivery.

There were four entries. First and second place were awarded to sophomore and junior students from New Trier.

Each year more than 125,000 students in grades six to eight enter the VFW's Patriot's Pen youth essay contest. The essay contest encourages students to examine America's history, along with their own experiences in modern American society, by drafting a 300- to 400-word essay. This year's theme was "What is Patriotism to Me?" Essays were graded on knowledge of the theme, theme development, and clarity.

There were 18 entries. First and second place were awarded to two eighth-grade students from Roycemore School in Evanston.

Judges this year were

Alan Blechman – Evanston: Businessman, Veteran

Stephen H. Hagerty – Evanston: Businessman, Mayor, City of Evanston

Linda Rockwell – Skokie: NFP Program Manager, local NFP Board member


Gerri Sizemore – Evanston: Volunteer and local NFP Board member

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There were 22 participants, of whom 41% came from Evanston. Four schools were represented, and more than 80% of the participants attend Roycemore School. Boys and girls were equally represented. Participants came from two Evanston schools and the surrounding communities.

Local Post 7186 awarded Patriot's Pen prizes of \$100 and \$50 and Voice of Democracy prizes of \$250 and \$100.

Both local Patriot's Pen winning entries and the Voice of Democracy first-place winner will compete in the Illinois VFW District 4 competition (north and west Cook County). The winner of that competition will then compete at the State level with 16 winners from the other Districts. Patriot's Pen prizes are awarded at the State level. Voice of Democracy prizes are awarded at both the District and State levels.

The first-place Patriot's Pen winner from each state will then compete for national awards totaling \$50,000, with each first-place state winner receiving a minimum of \$500 at the national level. The national first-place winner wins \$5,000 and an all-expense-paid trip to Washington, D.C., in March (pandemic conditions allowing).

The national first place Voice of Democracy winner receives a \$30,000 scholarship paid directly to the recipient's American university, college, or vocational/technical school. A complete list of other national scholarships ranges from \$1,000 to \$16,000, and the first-place winner from each VFW Department (state) wins a minimum scholarship of \$1,000.

The competition this year was reframed due to the social distancing limitations imposed by the pandemic. All entries were submitted via email, and anonymized digital files were shared with the judges. Entries were judged independently by five judges and results were collected by email. In prior years students submitted hard-copy essays and CD-ROMS. And judging was done in a single half-day group meeting.

Efforts were made to enlist the participation of teachers and administrators at School Districts 65 and 202, but only one student from Evanston Township High School competed. Next year's focus will be to increase awareness in the community and especially at the local schools and among minority students.

[Amy Milner](#), a Humanities teacher at Roycemore, offered feedback on the value of the program. She wrote, "We were looking for competitions for our students, as there is a lot of evidence that students benefit from writing to a real audience and for an actual purpose. ... It is an opportunity to have their writing read by someone other than their teachers. It is an opportunity to potentially be recognized or earn scholarship money. Finally, it is an opportunity to connect with our community. ... I see it as an opportunity for my students academically and as critical thinkers."

Here are quotes from some of the students' essays:

Question for Middle-School Students: "What Is Patriotism to Me?"

"Patriotism is standing up for your beliefs as demonstrated by your active voice

courage and commitment every step of the way. When you serve your country, community, and the people, you embody the true meaning of being a patriot.” – Sinclair H., Grade 8

“You can show loyalty and greatly impact your country. Going out and helping people in need is showing patriotism. Giving back to the community, shows empathy and appreciation.” – Keira K., Grade 8

“Patriotism is how you treat your fellow citizens. Patriotism means being a good citizen by upholding the ideals, values, and rights that are fundamental to being an American.” – Hamza K., Grade 8

“To me patriotism is supporting small businesses, voting, and backing the country during the pandemic.” – Samantha B., Grade 7

“You can only be a true American patriot if you stand up for other people and help people stand up for themselves, allowing everyone to have basic rights. Patriots are the people that keep America moving forward, not backward.” – Gabriel M., Grade 7

“To me, patriotism means devotion to my country because of voting rights, support of my country, and pride.” – Dave C., Grade 8, second place

“If you stop trying to be better than others, you might see that everyone has the same value no matter race, gender, or religion, and that is something to be patriotic about.” – Lillian S., Grade 8

“... patriotism means that everyone has equality and equal access to school, jobs and health care. ...I hope in the future that we can let anyone live in our country and that it will be a very peaceful country.” – Jack S., Grade 8

“Patriotism is not based on a person's love for their country, but rather on a person's love for the people who live there. People are the heart of a country so you should care for them as much as your country.” – Siyamo T., Grade 7

“Topical diversity is what America stands for. Patriotism helps us by making us rephrase what our country is.” – Lachlan C., Grade 8, first place

“Patriotism is working to help our country, through times of unrest or a pandemic. Moreover, it's not losing faith in the country, nor taking for granted the opportunities we have as citizens of the U.S.A. ... patriotism is caring for those around you and creating a better country for the generations to come.” – Marko M., Grade 8

“Patriotism is when you love and support your country by flying flags, voting, and engaging with current events. When you hang flags on holidays, vote, and protest for African American rights, you are showing patriotism.” – Emma Q., Grade 8

“American patriotism can be a positive or negative thing. At the extremes, we can either blindly love our country and fail to fix the issues, or we can exaggerate all the negatives and fail to see the positives. My question for you is: How do we find a middle ground? How do we make sure we see our country's positives with a gaze that also focuses on the negatives so that we can fix them?” – Aidan S.

"At its core, patriotism is devotion to and love for your country, but – especially in the U.S. – it has become twisted into a double-edged sword. Patriotism and nationalism are not synonymous and never should be; patriotism is positive if executed well, whereas nationalism and jingoism are not." – Conor S., Grade 8

"Voting is patriotic because it determines the leaders of the nation, it keeps the country a representative democracy and many groups of society have fought hard for the right to vote." – Robinson I., Grade 7

"Believing in your country's potential, service, and donating to charity are three things that define patriotism. Patriotism isn't performed when these acts are not being put to good use. Patriotism is performed by carrying out these acts that help shape the future of the country." – Matthew O., Grade 7

"Patriotism is showing love and devotion to the country you live in. In this case, it would be the one you were born in. Sometimes you don't have to love your leaders because you're your own person, but you can still support your country for allowing rights that other countries won't allow." – Lucy B., Grade 8

"Patriotism is being a good citizen by obeying the law, respecting others, and engaging in respectful actions which do not stain my country's reputation. I want everyone to think of my country as a peaceful and safe country where everyone is treated with kindness." – Sophia K., Grade 7

Question for High School Students: "Is This the Country the Founders Imagined?"

"... the country we have today is not the one our founders intended for us to inherit. This is the case because the founders structured the government to protect against a leader with unchecked power." –Holden J., Junior

"This is a country where it is the right of the people to make the changes that they deem necessary and important, because this is a country that is built by the people and for the people. I believe this is the country our founding fathers envisioned." – Chinonyelum O., Senior

"Abraham Lincoln once said, 'America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedom, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.' We must not allow this to become our reality." – Emilia D., Sophomore, First Place

"The founding fathers stated, 'All men are created equal in the eyes of God.' If this is true, we must work to make this country a safe and successful place for everyone, because we are all still humans, and we all deserve the chance to pursue all of our own versions of our American Dreams." – Samantha F., Junior

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This is a great program that gives young people a voice. The whole point of our 1st amendment is to allow we the people to freely express our views and beliefs. The Voice of Democracy and Patriots Pen both require participants to think about the subject at hand and cogently communicate their position. We need more of this type of free flow of ideas. Censoring conversation for no reason other than personal disagreement is anathema to the ideals of our great republic. I applaud each one of these participants and am thankful for their contribution.

William Pettv

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