

Experiencing National History Day: a Judge's Perspective

By **Jerry Simmons**

Each year the National Archives and Records Administration offers staffers a unique enrichment experience; the opportunity to carry out their own IDP or Individual Development Plan. IDPs at NARA can be interpreted broadly providing a wide range of enrichment and training opportunities. For the past two years my IDP has included judging exhibits at the Washington, D.C. area National History Day (NHD) competition. This event has given me the unique opportunity to work alongside other archivists, historians and educators, along with the chance to interact with some very bright and ambitious students from Washington D.C.-area schools. Amid the collegiate atmosphere of Howard University, the day carries a special kind of excitement and some serious cases of “the jitters” that keep students bolt at attention, delivering nerve-shaken answers to defend their projects.

For the two years I have worked NHD, I have judged exhibits on a team with two other judges. Following a well organized approach to critique various aspects of the projects, and working from a list of recommended questions, I am suddenly back in junior high school in Savannah, Georgia, nervously standing by my wobbly triptych in the school gym, waiting for the judging, but this time on the other side of the clipboard. Once the NHD judging team reviews each project, then does some preliminary judging, the chance to talk with the students is next, and they get to talk about their projects, defending the projects' relevance to the NHD theme, factual historical content and their conclusion. I find the personal interview phase of the judging to be the most rewarding part of the NHD experience, giving serious insight into students' thought processes, their research philosophy and approach, and how excited they have become about a particular event in history.

If you want to know what junior high school students are learning today, NHD is the place to go. First and most positive, I think, is that junior high schoolers are learning much more than I did at that age. Instead of crunching dates, names and factoids, they are expected to absorb and interpret complex event scenarios and compare them to current events, not just in American or World History, but also to complex issues of global economics and social justice. Today's students are doing far more than memorizing. They are analyzing facts, and in many cases, successfully interpreting the impact of historical events as a path to understanding today's social and cultural climate.

On the flip side of this is something that I have noticed in both my NHD judging experiences, namely students' dependence on the Internet for research and study. I will first say that I don't know what I would do without the Internet as an aid in my own professional and personal research. As an Archives Specialist and Authorities Cataloger for the National Archives, I would not survive the day without Biographical and Genealogy Master Index online, Ancestry.com, Library of Congress authorities online, Google and all the rest. The convenience is surely wonderful, but I think it has become the “candy-covered gingerbread cottage” for young researchers; deliciously easy and fast, and loaded with so much information that students are willing to feast on any information they find online. Oh yes, and images. Just like choosing a book for a book report, they pick the one with the most pictures.

I have found that too many NHD projects are almost entirely printouts from web sites. And when I asked a few students, “Did you find this image in a library or archives?” I am disappointed to hear, “Yes, it was in an archives on the Internet.” I'm alarmed at the number of students who think using a

web site is equivalent to actually visiting an archives or library for research. As I have seen in some of the exhibits I have judged, this mindset leads to a disjointed combination of images and misplaced captions. This leads to some awkward silences when the students are questioned about their exhibits.

Another concern for me is a clear lack of teacher participation as judges encounter some exhibits with blatantly erroneous information. Errors that should never have escaped the teacher's eye, and probably should never have been allowed out of the classroom. One example I can cite was an exhibit about the Battle of Gettysburg from NHD 2007, when that year's theme was "Triumph and Tragedy". Three young students attempted to defend a section of the exhibit displaying battle flags from Gettysburg (all printed from the Web!). Great Britain's Union Jack was among them. When quizzed on the decision to include the Union Jack among the Gettysburg flags, the students, almost in unison, answered, "It was on a web site about Gettysburg." This supports my fear that students consider all web site information as the gospel. But it also shows a lack of teacher involvement. I would hope that any degreed educator would give each NHD-bound project a proper vetting during the grading process, but most certainly before it enters initial judging phases at NHD.

The Washington, D.C. National History Day event gets a gold star in my grade book, though I do see areas for improvements. While I believe the Internet is a valuable tool for student researchers today, it should never be a sole-source for NHD project content, and teachers should remind their students that Internet data does not necessarily equal 100% correct information. NHD should strongly encourage, perhaps even require, actual visits to libraries and archives, and a field trip to a local library branch or archives facility, guided by their teacher, would be a great experience for budding researchers and historians. Finally, teacher involvement during the development stages is crucial. Without support from their teachers, students face even greater challenges in the NHD competition.

Jerry Simmons has his M.L.I.S. from the Catholic University of America School of Library and Information Science in Washington, D.C. and is the Team Leader for Authority Cataloging for the ARC (Archival Research Catalog) Project at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in College Park, Maryland.