

Judging National History Day in Pennsylvania

By Doris Malkmus

A colleague of mine, who for many years had judged at the Pennsylvania History Day, asked if I would take her place as a History Day judge, noting, "They always need judges." Knowing nothing about History Day, but attracted to the idea of teaching history through primary sources, I sent in my name to the History Day coordinator in Pennsylvania. In the NHD program students compete first locally, with winners advancing to the regional, state, and national competitions. My colleague had always judged at the state level and so did I, but to volunteer locally, contact the state coordinator listed on the History Day Web site (<http://www.nhd.org/Coordinators.htm>).

I found competitions are organized to the smallest detail, divided into junior and senior levels, group or individual works, and performance, documentary, exhibit, or historical paper categories. Students have explicit guidelines to follow, and these exactly matched the rubrics judges use in evaluation. Rules are specific, clear, and encourage students to highest standards.

I chose to judge exhibits and my group of three judges evaluated all exhibits in our category, and judged the run-off the following day. My team included two experienced judges who helped me identify the criteria for judging. While each judge wrote his or her own comments (which the students received later), our overall decision was consensual.

Most of the exhibits I judged were extraordinarily well done, in terms of content and visual appeal. Students used a wide range of primary sources. Each exhibit had an accompanying design paper citing sources and explaining how they (and their families) drove to archives during vacations, interviewed famous scientists or politicians, and acquired memorabilia. History Day exhibits clearly challenged teachers to keep fresh each year. History Day encouraged students and their families to create something memorable together. It also offered me, as an archivist and judge, the chance to see how historical primary source materials could be used to engage and ignite these creative young minds.

I contacted the Pennsylvania coordinator about a related matter and she suggested that an archivist propose to teach a short workshop in archival research at the National History Day competition in the Washington, D.C. area. Teachers have seldom done any archival research. Offering a workshop for History Day teachers, just like serving as a judge, provides an archivist with an excellent opportunity to get to know this potentially large community of teachers and students.

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