NATIONAL HISTORY DAY RECEIVES THE NATIONAL HUMANITIES MEDAL FROM PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA

COLLEGE PARK, Md. — National History Day (NHD), a year-long academic program focused on historical research for 6th to 12th grade students, was awarded the prestigious 2011 National Humanities Medal by President Barack Obama at a White House ceremony on Monday, February 13. Dr. Cathy Gorn, executive director of NHD, accepted the award on behalf of the NHD staff, board and honorary advisory council.

The National Humanities medals honor achievements in history, literature, education and cultural policy. For the first time ever, a K-12 education program received the National Humanities Medal. The citation for National History Day was for being “a program that inspires in American students a passion for history. Each year more than half a million children from across the country compete in this event, conducting research and producing websites, papers, performances, and documentaries to tell the human story.”

“It’s an honor to be recognized by the President and your peers for doing work that you love – helping students understand and appreciate history,” said Gorn. “NHD represents the most ambitious humanities learning model for middle and high school students in the United States today. I have witnessed firsthand that the study of history can change the life of a young person far beyond this program. These students achieve not only academically but are also prepared for life.”

“NHD is one of the nation’s most successful educational efforts in the humanities and much of the credit goes to Cathy Gorn,” said James F. Harris, chairman of the NHD board of trustees. “For 30 years, Gorn has dedicated herself to bringing history to life for students from across the nation and even the world. She is truly one of our nation’s unsung heroes, working each day to help ensure our students are prepared for college, the workforce and their responsibility as U.S. citizens.”

What began as a series of contests operating out of Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio is today an international, year-long academic program for 6th to 12th graders focused on historical research. NHD operates in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories, and is expanding internationally in Europe, China, Indonesia and South Korea, serving more than half a million children annually with its unique approach to the hands-on learning of history.

NHD, a non-profit organization, has long been the beneficiary of National Endowment for the Humanities support in its efforts to find creative ways to strengthen teaching of the humanities in American schools. NEH grants helped grow NHD, beginning in 1978 as a pilot start-up project to its current status as a...
self-sustaining organization. NEH support has proven to be catalytic, too, as numerous foundations and corporate and private donors have made critical gifts in recent years.

The impact of National History Day goes far beyond the annual contest. A recent comprehensive study by Rockman et al found that students who participate in NHD develop a range of college and career-ready skills, and outperform their peers on state standardized tests across all subjects – including science and math.

Gorn said she is as proud of the National History Day winners as she is of the students who find a way to improve their education overall through their participation in the yearly program. She cites two remarkable examples in the last few years:

- Along with their teacher, three students from Adlai E. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois helped change history in the famous “Mississippi Burning” case. The students selected the 1964 murders of civil rights workers in Philadelphia, Mississippi as their National History Day Project, creating a documentary that presented important new evidence and helped convince the state of Mississippi to investigate, reopen the case and convict Edgar Ray Killen for the murders.

- A special education student, whose former principal believed could not learn, created a documentary for National History Day as part of his history class, the only mainstream class he took. His first National History Day project went to the state finals, and in his second year of participation, he was a finalist in the annual contest. That same student was able to transition to all honors classes, with much of his progress attributed to the critical thinking and analysis skills he learned in developing National History Day projects.

“NHD works because it applies a research-based methodology, specifically engaging students in rigorous research, connecting teacher practice and instruction to student achievement, and providing students and teachers career-ready skills they can use outside the classroom,” Gorn said.

"Students have always told us how their NHD experience has changed their life, both in their academics and their careers. History not only teaches students about the stories of our past, but is vital to creating a generation of young people who can apply these lessons to the future," said author and journalist Cokie Roberts, a member of the NHD Honorary Cabinet.

In addition to National History Day, this year’s honorees included Kwame Anthony Appiah, John Ashbery, Robert Darnton, Andrew Delbanco, Charles Rosen, Teofilo Ruiz, Ramón Saldívar and Amartya. In 1990, the late historian Dr. David Van Tassel won the predecessor to the National Humanities Medal – the Charles Frankel Prize – for his role as founder and president of National History Day.

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About National History Day

National History Day (NHD) is a year-long academic organization for elementary and secondary school students. Each year, more than half a million students, encouraged by thousands of teachers nationwide, participate in the NHD contest. Students choose historical topics related to a theme and conduct extensive primary and secondary research through libraries, archives, museums, oral history interviews and historic sites. After analyzing and interpreting their sources and drawing conclusions about their topics’ significance in history, students present their work in original papers, websites, exhibits, performances and documentaries. These products are entered into competitions in the spring, at local, state and national levels where they are evaluated by professional historians and educators. The program culminates in a national competition each June held at the University of Maryland at College Park. Visit www.nhd.org. Follow us on Twitter: @nationalhistory or find us on Facebook: National History Day.