

TAKING HISTORY TO THE STATE

There were a half-million entries in the 29th Annual National History Day contest, and the Utah students who participated did well. *Very well* thanks to the Utah History Fair, a program based at Utah State University with impact statewide.

Zara Zemmels of Salt Lake City's West High School placed first in the nation in her category.

Four Utah students placed in the top 10 of their individual categories at the 2008 event. Utah had six students with five projects competing in the final round.

The path to the National History Day competition is an arduous road. The journey began with the Utah History Fair, an outreach effort of USU's Mountain West Center for Regional Studies, a program in the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences.



"Nearly 60 students represented the state of Utah at the national competition, and placing five projects in the finals was a major accomplishment," said Nicholas Demas, Utah History Fair director.

The Utah History Fair encourages participation of students in grades 4-12 to create research-related history projects. The national event limits participation to 6-12-graders.

During the 2007-08 season, more than 10,000 Utah students participated throughout the state, and Demas led the effort by crafting guidelines, making school visits and keeping teachers updated and involved through a Utah History Fair newsletter and more. He oversaw the local and regional fairs held throughout the state to select those who went on to the national competition.

To participate, students choose a category that reflects their interests and relates to the specific theme for the year. There are eight categories, including historical paper, individual documentary, group documentary, individual performance, group performance, individual exhibit, group exhibit and, new to the 2007-08 season, the Web site category.

JoLyne Merchant teaches history to sixth, seventh and eighth grades at Thomas Edison Charter School at its south campus in Nibley, Utah. She is among the school teachers across the state who, with her students, participate in the Utah History Fair, which she highly endorses.

“The Utah History Fair is an amazing opportunity for the students to gain skills they may not get elsewhere,” Merchant said. “As a history teacher, I am constantly trying to get the students to look at historical documents and think critically about historical events, and this is a perfect venue to get them to apply those skills I try so hard to teach.”

Utah’s national winner took top honors in the senior category of individual performance. Her topic? Music censorship.

Because of his multiple duties, Demas didn’t get to see Zemmels’s presentation, but he was very familiar with her script. He calls the winner a “History Fair dynasty in her own right.”

“The part of the project that struck me was her writing,” Demas said. “She seemed to use the parlance and cadence of the Beat poets. Her writing read like the dialogue of Bob Denver in ‘Dobie Gillis’ without the charade or frippery.”

Demas said Zemmels also drew on her experience as a youth radio disc jockey for KRCL. Through that work she became familiar with the Federal Communications Commission rules and regulations — including potential fines.

“Zara applied her experience, knowledge of music and history to complete her project,” Demas said.

The Utah History Fair began in 1980 and with the exception of one year, the program has always been based at USU. Ross Peterson, noted historian and long-time faculty member at USU, worked to bring the program to the university in the early years, Demas said.

The Utah History Fair is one year younger than Demas, its current director, himself a participant in the 1992-93 History Fair season. Later, he worked as a graduate assistant to the former director, the late Mike Johnson, during spring

semesters in 2005 and 2006. In spring 2006 he was hired as assistant director, then promoted to director in 2007. He is now writing a history of the fair as part of his work on a master’s degree.

“My favorite category in the Utah History Fair/ National History Day gamut is the Historical Paper,” Demas said. “The category is self explanatory — students write a paper on a historical topic. The paper that stands out in my mind placed 12th overall in the national competition and was written by Haley Parker of San Juan High School.

“Haley wrote about uranium mining in San Juan County, a subject that is not only related to recent history in the local, national or international levels, but one that still affects the populace of the county,” Demas said. “In our state competition, the paper caught the attention of folks from the Utah Division of State History, the Charles Redd Center at BYU and the judges.”

Haley’s paper earned the title *Best in Utah State History* in an award by the Utah Historical Society.

Kaden Groves, an eighth grade student at American Fork Junior High School, received a top award at the 2008 national contest for his individual documentary. He was awarded a \$5,000 cash prize and the prestigious Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Early American History Award.

With a view to recruiting these promising historians, USU’s Office of Admissions will make scholarship offers to students who placed well at the national competition, a gesture that reinforces the academic importance of the Utah History Fair, Demas said.

“There is much to be gained from such an outstanding program,” said Merchant. “All my students participate because I believe it allows them a wonderful opportunity to learn to think critically. Learning to research information is an invaluable skill that will serve them well the rest of their lives.”

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