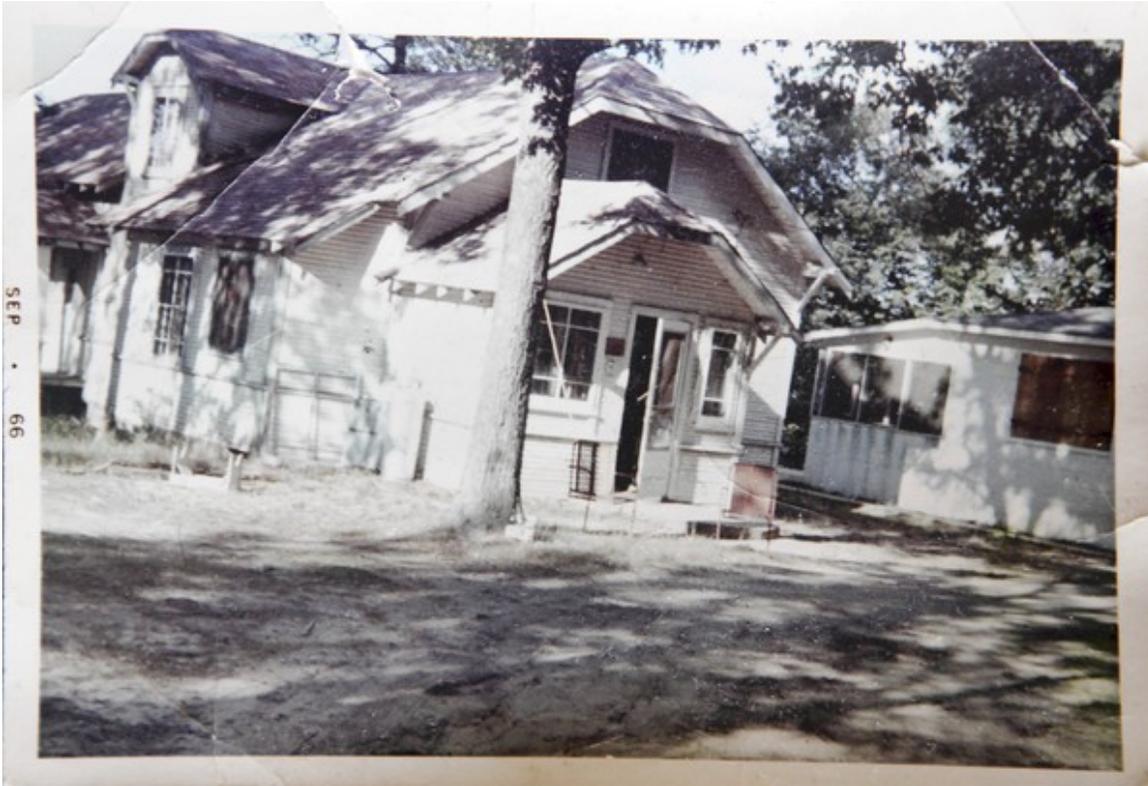


Chicago students excel at National History Day competition



A photograph taken in 1966 of the Elizabeth Ann Gregory-Hawkins family home in Idlewild, Mich. (Armando L. Sanchez, Chicago Tribune / September 28, 2012)

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June 17, 2013

Earlier this year, I told you about Chicago Academy High School sophomores, Le'Asia Williams, Summer Braxton and Hannah Modjeski, who were preparing a performance for the Chicago Metro History Fair.

Their skit was based on the Idlewild resort, an idyllic oasis in northwestern Michigan known in the 1940s and '50s as the Martha's Vineyard of the Midwest, but for affluent blacks.

I said I'd update on their effort. And, last week, they were among the roughly 3,000 students from around the country and the world who won several local and state competitions to arrive in College Park, Md., for the 34th annual, four-day National History Day Contest.

Let's back up a bit.

You should know that it's no easy feat to make it to the finals. This year, there were about 1,400 projects spanning five categories. Students wrote papers, performed skits, created Web pages or documentaries and assembled exhibits.

Lisa Oppenheim is the director of the Chicago Metro History Fair, which coordinates all the projects in the Chicago area. She's also the co-coordinator of the state's participation in National History Day. We talked about the impressive projects Chicago-area students worked on:

- Jeffrey Tang, Stephan Cernak, Lucas Levine, Evan Montgomery and Michael Lally placed ninth in the nation in the high school division with their skit examining the desegregation of jazz. The teens, who are juniors at Lincoln Park High School, explained how black and white jazz musicians used to jam together privately but couldn't perform together publicly. That began to change in the 1930s when white jazz and swing musician Benny Goodman invited black pianist Teddy Wilson to play with the Benny Goodman Trio.
- Natalia Ginsburg, a senior who graduated last week from University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, placed fifth in the nation for high school papers, with hers explaining how the underground abortion service affected Roe v. Wade. Ginsburg also got a special women's history award.

"In order to achieve highly at National History Day, you need a compelling argument backed up by evidence," said Oppenheim. "This paper had stories from people involved, conveyed an understanding of the effect grass-roots activism has on the law and gave its historical significance. But it also explained why the issue still matters today."

- Another project that advanced to finals and was sixth in the junior division in the nation was on Chicago's stockyards. "Welcome to the Stockyards" was an exhibit by Grace Kleinatis and Gillian Miller, both seventh-graders at Lincoln Elementary School in the Lincoln Park neighborhood. Every year, the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History puts a project from each state on display for a day during the competition. "Welcome to the Stockyards" was chosen this year to represent Illinois.

- Three Edwards Elementary School eighth-graders were also finalists. Aleksandra Gicala, Karolina Ptaszek and Joceline Cervantes were 14th in the nation in the junior division for their website explaining the 1930s Ukrainian genocide called the Holodomor, or extermination by hunger. Oppenheim said the girls deftly undertook a sophisticated topic.

"These girls are first-generation Americans and are growing up in a community where English is the second language for many people in the area," said Oppenheim. "They had to approach the project as historians to make sure they understood it and why it's important to remember."

- Kshama Shah is a junior at James B. Conant High School in Schaumburg. Her paper was titled "Dropping the Nitrogen Mustard Bomb on the Emperor of All Maladies" and told the story of chemotherapy's evolution as part of a chemical weapons program at the University of Chicago. Although she didn't make it to the finals, she did win a four-year scholarship to Case Western Reserve University. Among the things she'll be doing her senior year is deciding whether to go there.

Now on to Team Idlewild, whom I started this journey with earlier in the year. Although Summer, Hannah and Le'Asia went to National History Day, they didn't make it into the finals. Still, Oppenheim said their performance was well-researched and humorous.

"They had a solid bibliography, and it was a really charming performance on a story that's not often told," she said. "They deserved to be at National History Day. When they didn't get into the finals, they came out to root for the Benny Goodman team."

Hannah said getting to compete at the national level was worth the hard work. "It's something to say we've accomplished, and it added to our cultural experiences," she said.

"I've gotten a chance to meet kids from around the country, and I'm much more outgoing now," said Summer.

The teens said they'll continue to use the research and critical thinking skills they have honed for their project.

"It's something no one can take away from us," said Le'Asia. "You win some, you lose some. We ran a great race. We were upset at first, but we're OK now. There's always next year."

Chicago Metro History Fair is holding a symposium with student presenters at the Newberry Library on June 29 from 9 a.m. to noon, and an exhibition of top projects from Friday through July 12. To learn more go to **chicagohistoryfair.org**.

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