

According to Chicago Metro History Education Center Executive Director Frank Valadez, between 8,000 and 9,000 students originally entered this year's Chicago High School Metro History Fair.

They worked individually or in groups creating research papers, websites, live performances, documentaries and interactive exhibits detailing the moments and people that changed Illinois and the world around it such as the Cherry Mine disaster of 1909, the abolition of the state's death penalty, Jane Addams and women's suffrage, and Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. The top third of projects that the students displayed at smaller regional and city fairs advanced to the Chicago High School Metro Finals held at the University of Illinois at Chicago recently.

Joshua Martin, Dominique Brown and Eduardo Martinez are all freshmen at Disney II Magnet High School in Lawndale. Abra Berkoff is a sophomore at Lincoln Park High School. They joined 250 students at the finals each hoping for a place at the Illinois History Expo in Springfield earlier this month.

Martin, Brown and Martinez created a documentary focusing on the fight for LGBTQ rights. "It's about how we came to have the freedom we have now," Brown said. The project covered the beginnings of the LGBT movement in the United States from the Chicago Society for Human Rights, to Harry Hay and the Mattachine Society, the Stonewall riots and the work of celebrated figures like Vernita Gray. The film also included a candid interview with activist Bill Kelley.

Martin explained that they were drawn to the project simply by knowing other LGBTQ people. "We wanted to see how people used to be treated and how they are treated now," he said. "We wanted to show a timeline. We just hope that people come away from the film understanding that we should treat others equally. Just like people should respect other religions and beliefs, we should be respecting other people's sexuality and gender as well."

The trio is part of a club at school called "Glisten" that creates a comfortable environment for students to share coming out stories and talk about their issues. The film was screened for members of the club "They loved it!" Martin, Brown and Martinez said in unison.

But how would the judges receive it? Three of them watched the documentary that morning and—after the screening—had a few questions for the filmmakers. "What surprised you the most when you were researching this film?" The trio was asked. "For me, I found it shocking that people thought being homosexual was a disease," Martinez replied. "It's a very weird idea to have about a person who is still one hundred percent human."

In another darkened room, Berkoff screened her film "Love is Love: The Society for Human Rights" about the organization founded by Henry Gerber that is widely recognized as the first recorded gay rights organization in the United States. "The Society for Human Rights took responsibility for challenging the social norms of the 1920's," Berkoff said in a voiceover. "Its quick shutdown reflects American traditional values at its zenith. It was the first milestone in a long line that began to pave the way for equal rights for people in the LGBT community."

After the screening, Berkoff told Windy City Times that—prior to beginning work on the project—she had never heard of the Society for Human Rights. "I thought that the struggle for LGBT equality started only recently," she said. "When actually it stretches back much farther than I ever thought. I thought it would be interesting to educate more people on it. Since the movement has become so big today, it's really cool to see where it all began, at least in the US."

Berkoff said that, as a student, she would like to see the topic of LGBTQ rights covered in her history classes. "It's extremely important to at least have an option to take that class," she said. "I mean teachers are so afraid of offending people's beliefs but all my friends believe every human being deserves to be equal and respected. Sexuality is just one facet of someone's personality and you should judge someone by how they act, and how they treat others. The U.S. champions itself on equality and freedom for all and yet we still see discrimination against those in the LGBTQ community and that's completely unfair."

She added that her research of Gerber and the society has inspired her to be more active in the fight for equal rights. "If no one does anything about it, then inequality is just going to continue," she said. Berkoff's project was among those that made it to Springfield.

The history fair is now more than 35 years old and is based on the inquiry approach to education—a student-centric approach that encourages kids to investigate a topic through questioning and research. Valadez has been with the organization since 2009 and he has seen LGBTQ-related projects at the fair during each of the five years of his tenure. "The Gerber Hart Library has funded the John D'Emilio Award for the best LGBT project for many years now," he said. "One of the projects at the fair this year will receive that prize. Every student at this level has found a source, or investigated a topic or used a photograph that I have never encountered before. It's really great to be able to learn from these students."