

The Little Class That Could

Westfield class competes against other schools in statewide history competition

April 10, 2011

By S. ALEXANDER GEROULD Reprint courtesy of The Westfield Republican

WESTFIELD - For many students, studying in the library for hours at a time, learning aspects of the United States Constitution and forming lawyer-like arguments about what they learned doesn't sound like a lot of fun.

But, for one group of Westfield Academy and Central School students, it was well worth it.

In March, students in the WACS *We The People* class, under the direction of history teacher Greg Birner, traveled to Albany to take part in a competition aimed at testing the students' knowledge about the Constitution and government.

Students were scored based on their understanding of the subject; reasoning; the use of supporting evidence for answers; responsiveness to questions; and group participation. The students were first asked questions in groups and were allowed to use note cards. Then, the participants were asked follow-up questions where they were not allowed to use notes.

Westfield finished in seventh-place, topping many elite schools from New York City who had more money, time and resources to dedicate to the program.

"We were in a super tight competition this year," Birner said. "I asked them to work like dogs and make Westfield proud. They did those two things."

GETTING READY

Mike Bova, a Westfield student who participated in the competition, can remember sitting in the library for hours while going over the Constitution with his peers.

"We were so sick of it, but at the end we learned so much," Bova said. "We knew our stuff because we put so much effort into it."

The participating students also did mock presentations in front of school staff and community members to better prepare themselves for the competition.

Meanwhile, Neil Huber, another history teacher at the school, said the students would always pester him with questions.

"They're not shy about asking questions," Huber said. "That right there helped them a lot. They wanted to get better."

This "want to get better" was evident even the night before the students were scheduled to compete. While the students were in their hotel rooms, Michaela Hayden, a participating student, said most of their time was spent studying.

"We were all freaking out about it," Hayden said. "The next day, we were all refreshed. We all knew we could do our best."

But, when the students walked into the conference room and the doors closed behind them, a few students admitted to feeling a little out of place.

"When you walk in there your brain is overwhelmed," said Sara Fotchman, another student who participated in the competition. "You want to wow the judges."

MORE THAN ACADEMICS

While the students were proud of what they had learned, they were also equally proud of the life lessons they took from their experience. According to Birner and several students, they learned things which will help outside of the classroom, such as public speaking, critical thinking, building confidence, dedication and commitment and team work.

Take, for example, Shauna McGuay. McGuay, according to herself and Birner, wasn't sure if she wanted to take the class. She said she was nervous and scared. But, now looking back at the experience, McGuay was happy she took part in the competition because she felt she had worked to refine certain skills.

"It's amazing how much confidence you can get from this little program," student Mackenzie Abele said. "It's definitely a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

The students said they also learned skills which will help them become more informed regarding national issues and help them to become better voters.

"Without this class you don't become an educated voter," Abele said.

The students were also proud they were able to represent Westfield at the other end of the state.

"It shows them (the community) we do come here to learn," Fotchman said. "We wanted to show them we could do this. We made them proud. Everyone is so supportive. It's nice to know they're behind us."

Besides praising their community, classmates and experiences taken from the program, the students were also quick to praise Birner for the work the teacher had done to prepare them.

"He's not a teacher," Hayden said. "He's a learning tool. He's there to help us."

"Birner really loves what he does," added Rachel Herr, another student who participated in the competition.

Bova, meanwhile, said Birner challenged his students to ask deeper questions and to seek out knowledge.

"He taught us to think on our own and dig for answers," Bova said.

But with all the praise sent his way, Birner was quick to give it all back to his students.

"As a teacher, I loved learning from this experience, too," Birner said. "I knew I could run them through the ringer. I could beat them up mentally. I've got hard workers. I know they're working hard, so I have to reciprocate that."

Birner said watching his students at the competition made him proud, and he said he never would have been able to do what they did when he was younger.

"It just put a smile on my face," he said. "They did extremely well. They blew me out of the water."

But, it may have been one thing that Abele said which really hit home for Birner.

"I used to hate history," Abele said, "but Birner changed that."

"That," Birner said, "is what being a teacher is all about."