



## NEWS RELEASE FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **National First Freedom Student Competition Winners Announced**

#### *Local High School Student Earns National Recognition*

RICHMOND, VA. April 13, 2007 – The Council for America’s First Freedom 14<sup>th</sup> annual First Freedom Student Competition received more than 2,500 essays from high-school students nationwide, with additional American-student participation from as far away as Thailand.

The \$3,000 first-place prize is awarded to high-school senior Ashley Denney of Newton High School, Newton, Kansas. Nathaniel French of Gibbs High School, St. Petersburg, Florida, is the winner of the \$1,500 second-place prize, and Jessica Wasson of Edgerton High School, Edgerton, Ohio, is named the winner of the third-place prize of \$750. Other students who earned top-10 recognition are: Irteza Binte-Farid of Albemarle High School, Charlottesville, Virginia; Andrew Buchmann of Beulah High School, Beulah, North Dakota; Ashley Chiarelli of Alief Kerr High School, Houston, Texas; Tess DeLean of the Whitfield School, St. Louis, Missouri; Caitlin Dunn of Jay County High School, Portland, Indiana; Alexandra Robison of Branson High School, Branson, Missouri; and Renee Tsosie of Southwest Open High School, Cortez, Colorado.

The Council for America’s First Freedom promotes education about and respect for religious freedom by offering dynamic and engaging programs about religious freedom, which was initially protected by law in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and then enshrined in the religion clauses of the First Amendment. The First Freedom Student Competition is one such outreach program. The competition offers 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade students an opportunity to

compete for monetary awards as they explore history, assess current events and reflect upon the right to religious freedom.

“It is paramount that our young people understand the significance of this basic human right,” stated Ambassador Robert A. Seiple, president, Council for America’s First Freedom. “It is equally important that we educate and equip them with knowledge and respect for the diverse religious beliefs of others.”

The competition challenges students to write a well-researched essay about why religious freedom is important to them as heirs to this American historical tradition and as citizens of today’s pluralistic world. The competition promotes student understanding of the individual responsibility to value and protect this liberty, so that they will gain an understanding and appreciation for people of all faiths or no faith at all. In addition, the competition supports teachers as they address this important topic in their high-school classes.

Three successive rounds of judging, drawing on a pool of 111 judges from across the country identified the three winning essays. The first round of judges was comprised of historians, historical-site and museum professionals, retired educators and business executives. In this first round, each essay was read by more than one judge and rated with specific criteria to determine which essays would move on to the next round. The semi-final round of judging consisted of judges representing the Council’s National Program Advisory Board and the Education and Programs Committee. Again, all of the semi-final essays were read by more than one person and were rated with specific criteria. These scores determined the top-10 essays.

The final four judges are experts in the fields of education and law. Professor Robert M. O’Neil, former president of the University of Virginia, current director of The Thomas Jefferson Center for the Protection of Free Expression, and trustee for the Council for America’s First Freedom, chaired the final round. He presided over an esteemed group that included: Robert J. Grey, Jr., a partner with Hunton & Williams LLP, and past president of the American Bar Association; Rodney K. Smith, president of Southern Virginia University, and former dean of law at the Universities of Memphis, Arkansas at Little Rock, Montana and Capital; and Dr. Belle S. Wheelan, president of Commission on Colleges – Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, former Secretary of Education for the Commonwealth of Virginia, and former president of Northern Virginia Community College and Central Virginia Community College. Each judge read and individually scored all 10 essays, and the winning essays were determined by a group conference and consultation.

Speaking on behalf of the judges, Robert M. O’Neil commented: “The judges of the 2006/2007 First Freedom Student Competition were inspired by the outstanding quality of the

essays we had the privilege of reading and appraising. It is gratifying to read of the compassion and pride in the words of our young people.”

Dr. Isabelle Kinnard, Council Vice President for Education, commented: “The competition is held annually, and it is open to students in the continental United States and U.S. territories, and to American schools and American home-schooled students worldwide. We invite 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade students at all levels of academic placement to participate.”

### **The Winners**

**Ashley Denney, the winner of the \$3,000 first-place essay award, is a senior at Newton High School in Newton, Kansas, and a student of Ms. Karen Wiebe.** In addition to school and working a part-time job, Ashley is active in debate and forensics and also participates in the Model United Nations and Student Congress. Ashley plans to major in Political Science at Kansas State University, with a supplementary major in Latin American Studies.

**Nathanial French, the \$1,500 second-place essay award winner, is a senior at Gibbs High School in St. Petersburg, Florida, and a student of Mr. Dennis Zuercher.** Nat is an active member of his school’s drama department and president of Thespian Troupe 3756. He also serves weekly at the Ronald McDonald House, working with families of children with life-threatening illness. Nat is a member of the National Honor Society and plans to pursue a double major in Economics and Political Science when he enters college.

**Jessica Wasson, the \$750 third-place essay award winner, is a senior at Edgerton High School in Edgerton, Ohio, and is student of Mr. Matt Krill.** Jessica is active in marching band and choir and also participates in basketball and cross-country. She is a member of the National Honor Society and involved in regular church and community service. She is president of her school chapter of Future Educators of America and anticipates her college major to be in Social Studies for Secondary Education at Hillsdale College in Hillsdale, Michigan.

Ashley Denney’s first-place essay and a complete list of judges are attached. For more information visit [www.firstfreedom.org](http://www.firstfreedom.org).

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### **About the Council for America’s First Freedom**

The mission of the Council for America's First Freedom is to increase understanding and respect for religious freedom in diverse communities worldwide through education about this core belief: *the freedom of thought, conscience and belief*. The Council is a politically and religiously neutral 501(c)(3) organization that provides educational outreach programs that encourage audiences worldwide to examine their own consciences, to understand the beliefs of others, and to respect the right of religious freedom for all.