



NEWS RELEASE

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First Freedom Student Competition Winners Announced

National Essay Contest Draws 2400 Entries

RICHMOND, VA. (April 13, 2006) – The Council for America’s First Freedom 13th annual 2005/2006 First Freedom Student Competition received more than 2,400 essays from 48 states and American schools in Germany and Mexico. The competition furthers the mission of the Council by fostering education about religious freedom among high school students.

The Council for America’s First Freedom recognizes these students’ achievements on April 13, the anniversary of Thomas Jefferson’s birthday. The \$3,000 first-place prize will be awarded to high school senior Michael Nitz, of Woodfield, Illinois. Anna Catherine Mosteller of Mechanicsville, Virginia will receive the \$1,500 second-place prize, and Casey Dignan, of New Hope, Pennsylvania will be named the winner of the third-place prize of \$750.

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 first clauses of the First Amendment. The First Freedom Student Competition is one such outreach program. The Competition offers high school 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 students 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 our young people 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 88 historians, historical-site and museum professionals, retired educators and business executives. In this first round, each essay was read by more than one person and was assessed for content addressing the topic. The semi-final round of judging consisted of 18 judges representing the Council’s national program advisory board and education and programs committee members. Again, all of the semi-final essays were read by more than one person and were rated by specific criteria. The top 10 essays were determined by these scores.

The final five judges are experts in the fields of education and law. Professor Robert M. O’Neill, 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 immediate past president of the American Bar Association, Dr. E. Bruce Heilman, chancellor, of the University of Richmond and past president of the University of Richmond and Meredith College, 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. 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 2005/2006 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."

Isabelle Kinnard, J.D., Ph.D., education director at the Council for America's First Freedom, was delighted by the participation from so many students in the competition. She oversaw the expansion of a state-wide Virginia competition into a national competition. The competition began in the state where Thomas Jefferson's Statute for Religious Freedom first became law. "The competition is held annually," she explained, "and it is now open to public, private, parochial and home schooled students from all around the United States, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories, as well as to U.S. students attending high schools overseas and foreign exchange students studying in the U.S."

The Winners

Michael Nitz is a senior at McHenry High School West Campus in McHenry, Illinois. Michael's teacher is Mr. Cary Waxler. In addition to his serious attention to course work, Michael found time to play basketball and baseball and is a member of the Spanish Honor Society at his alma mater. He volunteers his time in the Park District in his community and is a grade school teacher's aide. Michael will attend the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana and although undecided at this time is leaning toward majoring in either education or business.

Anna Catherine Mosteller, a senior at Atlee High School in Mechanicsville, Virginia is a member of the National Honor Society who participates in many school, community and church activities including all-county band and orchestra, marching band, flute choir (director), Church youth choir, Church instrumental ensemble, Richmond senior high flute choir and American Society of Women Accountants (Richmond chapter.) She is the valedictorian of her graduating class and has received the Hanover County Citizenship Award, the Hanover Scholar Award, the PTA award for excellence in academic achievement, academic achievement awards in history, math, English, teacher cadet, and is listed in the *Who's Who Among American High School Students*. Anna Catherine will be attending Lenoir-Rhyne College in Hickory, North Carolina in the fall and plans to major in accounting with a minor in music. Her teacher is Ms. Sandra Watkins.

Casey Dignan, the third-place essay award winner, is a senior at New Hope-Solebury High School in New Hope, Pennsylvania is a member of the national honor society and member of the varsity track & field team. She was captain of the reading Olympics, co-founder of the environmental club, member of the drama club, debate club, science Olympiads, and representative (Singapore) to the model U.N. Her love for animals led her to Paws with Patience, the Pet Assisted Learning program, and is a member of 4-H. Casey also is an avid horseback rider and has competed in various shows. Casey has applied to several colleges including, NYU, Penn State, Colgate, Hamilton and Smith and plans to major in a foreign language or physics. Mr. Jon Gonsiewski is Casey's teacher.

Other students who earned top-10 recognition are: Jessica Bloom of Clarkstown High School South in West Nyack, New York; Sudipta Devanath of Nansemond-Suffolk Academy in Suffolk, Virginia, Michael Kim of Airline High School in Bossier City, Louisiana; Natasha Raj Kumar of Hershey High School in Hershey, Pennsylvania; Victoria Shinkarovsky of Wissahickon High School in Ambler, Pennsylvania; Timothy Tishman of Yorktown High School in Arlington, Virginia and Maryanne Tomazic of Freehold High School in Freehold, New Jersey.

The first place essay and a complete list of judges are attached. For more information visit www.firstfreedom.org.

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About the Council for America's First Freedom

The Council for America's First Freedom (Council) is a 501 (c)(3) organization based in Richmond, Virginia that provides educational programs, materials and information about religious freedom as an American historical development, as a contemporary controversy, and as an international human right. Currently, the Council is developing the First Freedom Center, a world-class facility that will offer a dynamic visitor experience with state-of-the-art, interactive exhibits exploring the development of religious freedom in America, and today's related national and international issues. The Center will be the first of its kind anywhere in the world. In addition, the Council sponsors the following annual initiatives: Presidential Proclamation of National Religious Freedom Day (January); First Freedom Awards; and the First Freedom Student Competition. For more information, please visit www.firstfreedom.org.