

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Students across Minnesota prepare for history day competitions
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INTERVIEWER: This is a big week for middle and high school students across Minnesota. Regional History Day competitions begin today and continue through this month. The annual contest involves tens of thousands of students in grades 6 through 12, who take a deep dive into the past. And the East Side Freedom Library in Saint Paul is there to help.

Every Saturday, volunteers there are available to help students comb through the archives and talk with historians and former teachers about their History Day projects. *Minnesota Now* producer, Alanna Elder talked with two students who are as passionate about History Day as she was when she was a kid.

ALANNA ELDER:

I'm in my late 20s. But I still remember my sixth grade History Day project. I wrote a paper about the Dust Bowl and interviewed my great grandmother and some acquaintances who lived through that period. It was one of the first times I followed an obsession through the process of researching, asking questions, and sharing a story.

So when I saw the deadline for this contest approaching, I really wanted to find out if young people today are having a similar experience. Tess and Willa Campion are twins and juniors at Open World Learning in Saint Paul. And Susanne Hollingsworth is a retired teacher who volunteers at the school and the East Side Freedom Library to help students with their History Day projects. Thank you all for being here.

SUSANNE HOLLINGSWORTH:

You're welcome.

SUBJECT 1:

Yeah, thank you.

SUBJECT 2:

Thank you for having us.

ALANNA ELDER:

So I'm going to start with Tess and Willa. How did you get interested in History Day?

SUBJECT 1:

We first got interested in History Day-- our sister had always done it. And it's like a big part of our school. We have a pretty small school, and the history teachers really promote History Day. And in sixth grade, it is required. And once we started, I think we both kind of had a feeling that we really enjoyed what we were doing and really enjoyed making a documentary.

ALANNA ELDER:

So I want to turn to Susanne. You're a volunteer who helps students with their projects so they can write papers, create documentaries, posters, websites, or perform a moment in history. What do mentors like you do for students who are taking this on?

SUSANNE HOLLINGSWORTH:

First of all, I think we help them get organized and figure out the parts of a History Day project, which are not like anything they have done before, for the most part, especially in sixth grade. You have to have a context. You have to have a main event. You have to show an impact of your main event.

We also help a lot with research, starting at the university library. And so they can take out books pretty easily from the university through their school librarians.

ALANNA ELDER:

And what changes have you noticed in students who've completed these projects?

SUSANNE HOLLINGSWORTH:

They are a lot more confident. Kids that were shy, I guess, they really want to interview those sources, those primary sources. And so they get over it. And if they keep doing it year after year, some of the shyest people I knew in sixth and seventh grade turned out to be just able to just call somebody up that was like a former legislator or Senator or something like that.

So I think it's also really good preparation for college, the kind of analysis that you have to do in order to do a good History Day project.

ALANNA ELDER:

Yeah. Yeah. Speaking of that analysis, Tess and Willa, I'm curious what's your process for choosing and narrowing your idea?

SUBJECT 2:

We like to focus on social movements. That's something that really interests us, and obviously, looking at international because that takes us like out of what we might learn in school. Because often, those ones are more obscure or unique and aren't really in the curriculum. So then after that, we kind of just narrow it down.

I think it's really great to have mentors, like Susanne, or people at the East Side Freedom Library because it really helps when you talk with people and you're able to have those conversations because it helps you realize, oh, like maybe this is too broad, maybe this is too narrow. Like, where do I need to expand it? And it really helps isolate those main events.

SUBJECT 1:

Yeah, and each year there's a theme. So that sort of narrows the topics you can choose. So yeah, this year, the theme is "frontiers in history," which I have found to be one of the more difficult themes. Usually, they're slightly more broad.

ALANNA ELDER:

OK. So "frontiers in history." What's your project this year?

SUBJECT 1:

This year, we're doing the troubles in Northern Ireland. So we're looking at the physical frontiers between neighborhoods, Catholic and Protestant, within Northern Ireland's major cities and the impact that had on the tumultuous times that was the troubles.

ALANNA ELDER:

Last year, I saw that you went to nationals, right, and won an honorable mention for your documentary about the Kyoto Protocol. So I want to let your past selves remind everyone about that agreement.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- The Kyoto Protocol elevated the debate over how to address what would become the 21st century's biggest problem, climate change. This agreement set a precedent for governmental action and inaction on establishing climate policy. Ultimately, the failure of the Kyoto Protocol allowed the continued rise of greenhouse gas emissions, but also established the framework for future diplomatic climate summits.

[END PLAYBACK]

ALANNA ELDER:

How does having learned so much about these talks in the '90s impact how you think about climate change news or climate action today?

SUBJECT 1:

Currently, right now, we're both taking AP Environmental Science. And I think it's super interesting to have this background, researching all these climate agreements. Because although our main event was the Kyoto Protocol, we had to go back and look at like earth summits in Stockholm and Rio.

SUBJECT 2:

Yeah, I agree. Also, it's very interesting when you're doing a topic that obviously is in the news at that time. So when we were doing it, when we started in October, the climate summit in Glasgow hadn't happened yet. But we were researching these structures and frameworks for all these summits and these agreements. And then you see when it actually happens and see how these diplomats are debating.

ALANNA ELDER:

Another of your projects jumped out at me as really resonating right now. That one told the story of the Third World Liberation Front. So I have a clip from it as well.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- In 1969, protests, led by a coalition of minority students at the University of California Berkeley pushed the university to break barriers in education with the creation of the first Ethnic Studies Department at a major university. Strikes, led by the student organization, Third World Liberation Front, protested the white eurocentric curriculum being taught throughout California and the nation.

[END PLAYBACK]

SUBJECT 1:

That was a super fun topic to research. And even at the time, our district, St. Paul public schools, was discussing having an ethnic studies requirement for graduation. And then just this past year, they put in place that requirement. So the grade below us will have to take an ethnic studies class, a semester-long class to graduate.

SUBJECT 2:

Yeah, I know I was really excited when we were doing that research. Having it be in Minnesota was really fascinating and see how it had come down from higher education to secondary education, and just that it was very close to us, which is always fascinating to learn.

ALANNA ELDER:

So I also noticed Susanne's name in the credits for both documentaries. How did you help?

SUSANNE HOLLINGSWORTH:

They usually put our names in the credits. It seems to be somebody started doing that a long time ago. And they always do it. We just did the same thing that we do with all the other kids. We ask them questions.

I don't know. Did you get any help for finding resources?

SUBJECT 1:

Yeah I know that when we visited the East side Freedom Library, Peter, who works there, set us up with multiple resources. And I think even an interview for that one-- we talked to a professor at Berkeley. And I think we were able to get that professor's name from Peter.

ALANNA ELDER:

OK. Cool. Well, thank you so much for taking the time. This was really fun.

SUBJECT 1:

Thank you.

SUBJECT 2:

Thank you so much.

INTERVIEWER:

That was *Minnesota Now* producer, Alanna Elder talking with high school juniors Tessa and Willa Champion, and History Day volunteer Susanne Hollingsworth. As I said, regional History Day competitions begin today and continue throughout this month. The state contest is scheduled for the end of April.