

We The People, Part One by Jack Pugh

The object of government is the welfare of the people.
--Theodore Roosevelt

All the soaring rhetoric about the U.S. Constitution, about liberty and freedom, contentions that our Constitution was a Gift from God, the reverence for the Founders, all of the emotional and grandiose claims made about it and for it can be summed up and understood in this simple quote from Teddy Roosevelt.

Taken together, the Constitution and the body of judicial interpretation that defines its application constitute the most profound political and social experiment ever devised. Too few of us understand it except in the simplest of terms, and it seems we often misunderstand it.

That is what the Center for Civic Education seeks to remedy with the We The People program of constitutional study in the schools.

“We The People: The Citizen and the Constitution” began in 1987, supported by an act of Congress, under the auspices of the Commission On The Bicentennial of the United States Constitution. Former Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court Warren Burger chaired the Commission.

In 1991 the program was transferred to the U.S. Department of Education. It is now run by the Center for Civic Education, which is based in California and oversees the program nationwide.

Since its inception 30 million students and 90,000 educators have participated in these courses, which are taught at elementary, middle and high school levels.

In Wyoming about 5,000 students have been through the high school level competitive hearings version of the course, and since 2007 over 28,000 Wyoming students at all levels have been through the curriculum.

In Cheyenne 21 elementary schools have taught the course to their students.

127 Wyoming teachers have been trained to teach the We The People program. The high school competitive version is taught in fifteen Wyoming school districts.

It is taught without the baggage of political parties or any faction’s special ideological bias.

We The People in Cheyenne started in the 1987-88 school year under Richard Kean, who was teaching at East High School at the time. Mr. Kean was the first Wyoming state coordinator for the program. In 2001 Mr. Kean joined the Center for Civic

Education and Matt Strannigan, then principal at Central High School, became the Wyoming coordinator for the program.

“This is the best way to deliver civics and government in the classroom”, says Mr. Strannigan. Students are organized into teams, and they share responsibility for the research and writing that is required.

“Dividing a classroom into teams of students, or panels, makes them dependent on each other for the learning. This may be the most important aspect of the program”, says Mr. Strannigan. “They become a community that learns together, that supports and challenges each other.”

In addition to the classroom work the teams involved in the competitive version of the course participate in a statewide competition. They are judged and scored on their presentations and their knowledge. The winner of the state competition goes to Washington, D.C. to compete against student scholars from around the country.

Central High School of Cheyenne will represent Wyoming in this year’s competition. Last year’s Central team was ranked fifteenth in the nation overall.

Teams are assigned questions about the Constitution and research the topics. Classroom time consists of research and discussion and work on essay writing. Students distill that research into a four minute written summary.

The teams present this summary to a panel of judges, who then submit the student panel to questioning about the topic. It is here that the depth of student knowledge becomes apparent, as does their ability to think quickly and deeply about the philosophical, historical and social relationships that shape the question and its answer.

The best measure of We The People’s success comes after the students have taken their places in our communities. Surveys show that across the board they are more civic minded, more politically aware, more politically active, more knowledgeable about the structure and functions of our government and vote in higher numbers than the rest of the population.

Kia Murdoch is one of the candidates for student body vice-president at the University of Wyoming. She will be a senior next year. She is a We The People alumnus from Blackfoot, Idaho.

“We The People made me grow as a student and as an individual”, she says. Ms. Murdoch says that the academic disciplines she learned in the We The People course affected her other courses, both in high school and college. “It taught me to more fully engage with my other classes. I started analyzing and thinking critically about what I was being taught”, she says.

“I learned”, she says, “how to be a part of our government as a citizen.”

Ms. Murdoch is a Dean’s List scholar, and she credits the skills she learned in the We The People program for that. She will be applying to law school this fall.

It may be that we build and sustain our democracy one citizen at a time. We The People is doing just that, student by student, idea by idea. Kia Murdoch does not stand alone.