

We the People State Champions Milford High School Participate in First In-Person National Finals Since 2019

By Tom Jarvis

On the weekend of April 21-24, 2023, students from Milford High School represented New Hampshire in the We the People National Finals at the National Conference Center in Leesburg, Virginia, where they placed 29 out of 48 participating schools. The school that won first place was Maggie L. Walker Governor's School from Richmond, Virginia.

Approximately 1,000 students participated in 576 half-hour hearings. This was the first in-person event of its kind since before the pandemic in 2019.

Participating students from Milford High School were Robert Anderson, Madelyn Bergen, Charles Cevaso, Carla Costas, Ziera Dodson, Eden Leak, Morgan Peterson, Olivia Rolanti, Troy Williams, and Nikol Zyzen.

In 1987, the Center for Civic Education developed the innovative program called We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution (WTP). Brought to schools by the NHBA, WTP is a nationally acclaimed civic education program that enhances students' understanding of the Constitution and Bill of Rights and allows them to discover its contemporary relevance.

The program's culminating activities are simulated congressional hearings, where students evaluate, take, and defend positions on six units of constitutional law principles before a panel of judges made up of NHBA members and other Civics leaders in the community. District hearings occur in December of each year and the State Finals take place in January. The top performing class then earns the opportunity to represent New Hampshire in the National Finals in or around Washington, DC.

Thomas Lundstedt, Milford's teacher of the program and a recent recipient of the James Madison Fellowship, is an alum of both Milford High School and WTP. This is his second year of teaching.

"The trip went really well," Lundstedt says. "The kids were excited even though they were tired getting to the airport at 3:00 am. I think they really appreciat-



Milford High School students at the National Conference Center after the first day of National "We the People" Finals. From left to right: Ziera Dodson, Charles Cevaso, Morgan Peterson, Madelyn Bergen, Nikol Zyzen, Eden Leak, Troy Williams, Olivia Rolanti, and Robert Anderson. Courtesy Photo

ed the camaraderie with one another. That's something I picked up on over the course of the trip. And there was definite improvement across the board. There are a couple kids that I was particularly proud of, who didn't necessarily have strong public speaking skills at the beginning, but I saw a huge improvement over the course of the year. So, I consider that to be a personal victory."

Lundstedt says he is pleased with the amount of effort his students put into the program.

"My class ends in January. So, they are doing this on their own time, on top of all their regular classes," he says. "I think that alone is a testament to how motivated they were and how hard they worked."

When they weren't participating in the hearings, the students were able to tour nearby Washington, DC.

"We studied on the National Mall for a little bit, and we went to most of the monuments. Some of the kids were seeing them for the first time," Lundstedt says. "We also went to the Capitol Building, the Museum of African American History, the Holocaust Museum, Mount Vernon, and the Museum of American History. And the kids got to meet both of our New Hampshire senators, which they thought was really cool."

The students also visited the United States Supreme Court, where they viewed all the exhibits and attended a courtroom lecture.

To pay for the trip, Milford needed to fundraise

\$13,000. The students sold 700 boxes of Krispy Kreme doughnuts during the November Midterm Election, sold other baked goods during the deliberative session and town voting, and hosted school bake sales – all on their own time. Through those efforts, plus a one-time Milford Community donation, and a donation from the Center for Civics Education, Milford was able to raise \$9,900.

The remaining \$3,000 was donated to them from the New Hampshire Bar Foundation’s Advancement of Justice Fund, Frederic K. Upton Fund, and the Advancement of Justice Restricted Fund.

“We are super grateful and appreciative to the New Hampshire Bar for helping to get us there,” Lundstedt says.

When asked about his feeling on not placing in the top ten, Lundstedt was optimistic.

“The personal growth to me is the most important,” he says. “If you look at from when I met [the participating students] in September, there’s a tremendous amount of growth in terms of their civic knowledge, their ability to communicate effectively, and their ability to write. Those are all big victories to me. Ten years from now, they’re not going to say, ‘I came in 29th in the National competition.’ They are going to say, ‘I participated in a civics competition at the national level.’”

Attorney Shawn Tanguay, a WTP alum from 1989, was one of the volunteer judges for both the State and National Finals.

“It’s a very intense process, but very rewarding at the same time,” Tanguay says. “It’s great to see so many young individuals having the passion for civics, the constitution, and the government. It was fantastic to see that type of interest and dedication. It takes a lot for these kids to put together these presentations and to give a professional response to a lot of difficult questions that come from the judges.”



Milford High School students holding recently decided SCOTUS cases outside of the US Supreme Court. From left to right: Charles Cevaso, Eden Leak, Carla Costas, Robert Anderson, Troy Williams, Olivia Rolanti, Nikol Zyzen, Morgan Peterson, Madelyn Bergen, and Ziera Dodson. Courtesy Photo

Charles Cevaso, a junior at Milford High School and one of the participating students, says it was a wonderful trip and that he couldn’t ask for a better teacher for the class.

“It was kind of surreal just being there,” Cevaso says. “But even with the stress of competing, it was fun to just tour everything in the Capitol. It was definitely a great experience to have. I feel like we did very well – definitely better on the second day, as we got more of a foothold. I think everyone on the team was outstanding in their work.”

The NHBA’s Law Related Education department is actively engaged in efforts to increase the WTP program’s outreach with the goal of getting the program into more schools.

“The We the People program is an effective tool to help create future citizens who are knowledgeable in civics and can communicate effectively,” Lundstedt says. “Even if they don’t go into government or politics or something related, they have that civic knowledge with them to make their decisions at the voting booth. And they also have the public speaking and analytical writing skills that they’ve improved upon. These are all skills that transfer for the rest of their lives, no matter what career path they choose.”