

# The Past in Focus

## NATIONAL HISTORY DAY

**THE KENNETH E. BEHRING NATIONAL HISTORY DAY COMPETITION IS THE CULMINATION OF A YEARLONG PROJECT IN WHICH STUDENTS IN GRADES SIX THROUGH TWELVE IDENTIFY A TOPIC RELATED TO AN ANNUAL THEME, RESEARCH THEIR TOPIC, AND PRESENT THEIR FINDINGS IN ONE OF FIVE CATEGORIES. AS THESE 2015 PARTICIPANTS EXPLAIN, STUDENTS WHO COMPETE IN NHD COME AWAY FROM THE EXPERIENCE WITH MUCH MORE THAN A GREATER APPRECIATION OF HISTORY.**

### **Justin Senzer, New Hyde Park, NY**

Third place, Senior Individual Documentary

*Slaying the Dragons of Eden: Carl Sagan's Crusade to Find Our Place in the Cosmos*

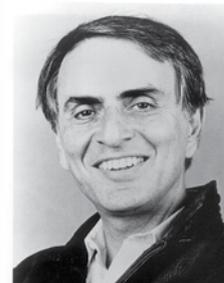
While at Cornell University last year to help my brother move in, I visited the Johnson Art Museum where I saw a permanent LED light exhibit, which is a nightly campus attraction. The exhibit was dedicated to Carl Sagan, one of the school's most famous faculty members. While my brother and parents attended orientation, I conducted some preliminary research on Sagan and was immediately struck by not only his dedication to science education, but also his work as a political activist.

Carl Sagan was an astronomer, educator, and political activist who believed it was vital for everyone in society to learn about and understand science. Sagan pioneered the effort to bring science to the masses by writing and producing the public television series *Cosmos* and by making frequent appearances on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. He was an eloquent speaker who engaged others with his easy manner and use of models and exciting visuals. Building on his celebrity status, Sagan also became a well-known and outspoken critic of President Reagan's

use of Cold War rhetoric to support the Strategic Defense Initiative, also known as Star Wars—a costly anti-ballistic missile system intended to prevent foreign attacks on the U.S.

Using the documentary format for my project allowed me to showcase Sagan's brilliance as a communicator of complex scientific concepts. The title of my presentation refers to Sagan's book *The Dragons of Eden*, in which he explored the theory of evolution and human intelligence and contrasted these ideas with the theory of creationism. My title was meant to highlight Sagan's commitment to rational scientific reasoning as the basis for understanding the origins of the universe.

Through this project, I learned to conduct research beyond the Internet, including accessing archives as well as primary sources from the Library of Congress. I also learned how to locate and connect with academics in various scientific fields, and I was even fortunate to interview two scientists who actually worked with Sagan. Their personal insights became an invaluable part of my documentary.



THE PLANETARY SOCIETY





## Olivia Grose, Sheboygan, WI

Second Place, Junior Individual Exhibit

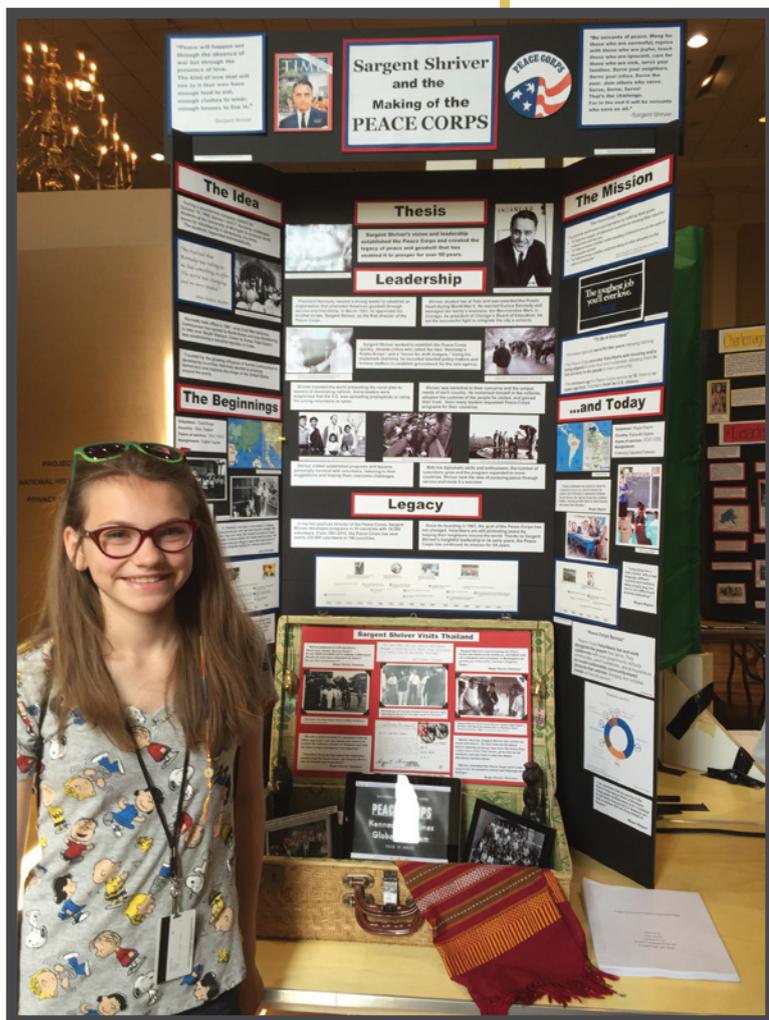
*Sargent Shriver and the Making of the Peace Corps*

My grandfather, David Burger, was one of the first Peace Corps volunteers sent to Thailand, in 1962. I've always been fascinated by the stories of his adventures and intrigued by the souvenirs and photos he brought back from his travels. My grandfather grew up during World War II, the Korean War, and the tensions of the Cold War era. He wanted to make a difference by working toward peace, and was inspired by John F. Kennedy's speech urging youth to devote two years of their lives to serving people in developing countries. His experience motivated me to learn more about the Peace Corps.

The idea of creating a "peace army" of young Americans was not new, but it took Kennedy's inspiring speeches challenging young people to consider volunteer service in developing countries to capture the imagination of America's youth. Kennedy was troubled by the growing influence of Soviet Communism in developing countries. He wanted to promote democracy and improve the image of the United States. He asked his brother-in-law, Sargent Shriver, to create a task force and develop a plan for the Peace Corps. After taking office, Kennedy appointed Shriver as its first director.

In talking with my grandfather, I discovered that while he was serving in a small village in Southeast Thailand, Shriver actually traveled to the area to meet the volunteers. My grandfather even had photos of himself and other volunteers greeting Shriver near his helicopter. I was thrilled to have a primary source in my own family. In addition to photos of Shriver, I collected original newspaper articles, including an interview my grandfather gave to a local newspaper about his Peace Corps training just prior to leaving the States, a photo from a Thai newspaper showing the first volunteers arriving at the Bangkok airport, and a newsreel of JFK introducing the idea of the Peace Corps to the public. Doing my project as an exhibit allowed me to display some of these artifacts in a Thai suitcase that my grandfather brought back from his travels.

Shriver was a great subject for this year's NHD theme, Leadership and Legacy in History. He had the ability to inspire and motivate others to help run the Peace Corps. He also had impressive diplomatic skills. He traveled the world listening to the concerns and needs of different peoples. Shriver embraced their cultures and adopted their customs, and he worked with Congress to carve out funding for the new agency. Most importantly, he believed in improving lives, and he was persistent in the idea that everyone can make a difference.



## Neha Shakir, Chandler, AZ

First Place, Junior Individual Website

*The Seeing Eye*

I love dogs. When I began searching for a topic for National History Day, I was looking for a connection between animals—dogs in particular—and the theme of Leadership and Legacy. When I began to research the history of Seeing Eye guide dogs, I realized that much of the work could be credited to one man: Morris Frank. I found Frank's character and work fascinating.

Morris Frank was born in 1908 in Nashville, Tennessee. His mother, who was blind, was a strong woman who was actively involved in her community. She had a big influence on Frank, who became blind himself at age 16. When Frank heard about a school in Switzerland where blinded World War I veterans were being trained to work with guide dogs, he contacted the program's founder, Dorothy Harrison Eustis, to see if he could obtain such a dog. His determination impressed Eustis, and Frank traveled to Europe, where he was paired with a dog. Afterward, he returned to the U.S. on a mission: to establish a guide dog training program to help other blind people.



Neha Shakir with The Seeing Eye's Craig Garretson

Through The Seeing Eye's archivist, R. Bruce Johnson, I was able to get interviews with Doug Roberts, a friend of Morris Frank, and James Kutsch, the current president of The Seeing Eye. On a trip to

Morristown, New Jersey, home of The Seeing Eye, I met Mr. Roberts, who described his personal experiences with Morris Frank and gave me a tour of the facility and the dog-training kennels. Mr. Kutsch explained the organization's policies and procedures, and Mr. Johnson took me to the archives, where I was able to conduct part of my research.

Morris Frank worked tirelessly to rehabilitate young, blinded soldiers so they could live independent lives. He established procedures for safely and successfully pairing individuals with dogs. Over the years, he met with three U.S. presidents, helping to create accessibility laws that would allow service dogs into passenger cabins on trains, buses, and airplanes, as well as in restaurants and other public places.

Despite enduring hardships and resistance to his ideas, Morris Frank proved to society not only that blind people mattered, but that they could live independently as contributing members of society. After he demonstrated the safety and reliability of using guide dogs, others were inspired to use therapy dogs for many conditions. Eighty-five years after establishing a means of independence for the blind, The Seeing Eye continues Frank's mission.

## Matthew Broussard, Baytown, TX

First Place, Senior Individual Performance

*Resisting the Reins of Power: Washington at His Finest in the Temple of Virtue*

Through participation in National History Day over the past six years, I've discovered that my favorite era in American history is the Revolutionary period. When I heard that the theme of this year's contest was Leadership and Legacy in History, my first thought was of America's first commander in chief, George Washington. I decided to focus on his virtue, a trait best exemplified in Newburgh, New York, as Washington skillfully dealt with threats to the fledgling democracy.

Back in sixth grade, I had just played Chip in our community theater's production of *Beauty and the Beast*, so my natural inclination was to choose the performance category for my first NHD project. Over the years, I began to see performance as a way of bringing history to life. I realized, however, that I couldn't possibly convey the magnitude of Washington's actions by portraying him, as he would never speak highly of himself out of a sense of humility. Instead, I portrayed John Adams. Adams was extremely jealous of Washington, and it



## Joyce Xu, Boulder, CO

Second Place, Senior Paper

*Man, Myth, and Icon: The Life and Legacy of Che Guevara*

I've always been interested in Marxist theory and the rise of communism. In fact, my seventh grade National History Day project focused on the Russian Revolution. I found Che Guevara especially interesting because not only did his work revolutionize the Latin American sociopolitical landscape, but his death helped give rise to a whole new era of leftist, anti-establishment sentiment around the world. That his actions inspired so much fervent love



and hatred across the spectrum intrigued me and helped convince me to study him in depth.

Che Guevara was a key Marxist revolutionary in 20th-century politics who played an integral role in the Cuban Revolution of the 1950s. After his capture and execution by CIA-backed Bolivian forces, his image went on to become one of the defining icons of counterculture movements worldwide. The scope of

Guevara's wide-reaching legacy really surprised me: While I knew that his image had played a role in 1960s counterculture, I found that it also surfaced a lot during the more recent Arab Spring; his guerilla tactics were apparently so successful, they were adopted by al-Qaeda.

In doing my research, I had to consider the bias of various sources due to the controversy surrounding Guevara's character. But tying together and presenting such a complex history was an incredibly rewarding experience. Conducting research and analysis, understanding and synthesizing multiple perspectives, and tying it all together with a cohesive, presentable argument are skills that are invaluable in just about any field.



didn't help that Abigail Adams was quite taken with Washington. Still, even Adams couldn't deny Washington's greatness.

I began my performance as a disgruntled John Adams—a bust in the Fred W. Smith National Library for the Study of George Washington come to life—grumbling about how everyone loves George Washington. Then I set up the context of the situation: The American Revolution had been won, and all that was left to do was to wait for the peace treaty to be signed in Paris so the Continental Army could be disbanded. But the men hadn't been paid, and they weren't happy about it. The nationalist faction of Congress seized upon this unrest to pressure Congress to revise the Articles of Confederation so as to give the federal government more power. Washington called a meeting at army headquarters in Newburgh, where he masterfully addressed the army—and the threat of mutiny—and cemented his reputation as a unique and powerful leader.

Although the political climate was one that greatly feared a central power such as a monarch or dictator, officers in the army vowed

to support Washington if he wanted to overthrow Congress. Washington could easily have declared himself king. The fact that he did not do so—and that he served for two terms rather than for life—made his actions unprecedented: Throughout history, those who had been in a similar position used it to gain more power, from Cromwell, Napoleon, and Castro to Lenin and Stalin. We see the same thing today, where a despotic leader is overthrown and replaced by a military dictatorship. Americans need to understand why it is that our revolution succeeded when so many others have failed. The answer is George Washington.

National History Day has proven to be an incredibly valuable investment of my time. In addition to providing me with a deeper understanding of history, it has exposed me to many other areas of study, including Constitutional law and medicine, in which I've taken great interest.