

We The People, Part Two by Jack Pugh

The people need to “see themselves” experimenting in democratic forms.
--Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*

In spite of our eternally imperfect understanding, wrote Isaiah Berlin, our task as a civilization is to “make straight the crooked timber of humanity”, to make ourselves more than we have been or thought we could be.

And isn't that the task we've given our schools? Take our children, we tell educators, and shape them into a citizenry that can run and preserve the most complex free society in history, and run it humanely and with good sense. Even, occasionally, with wisdom.

That task falls on our teachers.

The premier civics education program in the country is the We The People curriculum run by the Center for Civic Education. It includes a training component for teachers, comprised of summer institutes held in various parts of the country. In them teachers attend lectures from constitutional experts, and interact with these experts in both group and one-on-one discussions.

The Center for Civic Education has created a nationwide community of scholars and teachers for the study of the Constitution. Sara Miller, who teaches U.S. history and is the We The People instructor at Cheyenne Central High School, attended the summer institute in Nevada, and continues to share ideas with the Nevada educators.

Matt Strannigan started The Grand Teton Summer Institute. Mr. Strannigan is the Wyoming We The People state coordinator. The Institute has been held at the Teton Science School in Jackson Hole for the last nine years.

Teachers studying at the institutes have resources besides the constitutional scholars: mentor teachers.

Nate Breen of Cheyenne is typical of the mentor teachers at the Teton Institute. Mr. Breen taught in Laramie County School District #1 for 36 years, many of them at Central High School, where he taught Advanced Placement courses in government and the We The People curriculum, winning four state championships with his teams of student scholars.

His student scholars placed fifteenth overall in the national We The People competition in 2012.

Mr. Breen was named American Civics Education Teacher of the Year in 2009, an honor given jointly by the Center for Civics Education, the Center for Congress at Indiana University and the National Education Association. He is now a member of the Laramie County School District #1 Board, having been elected last November.

“We work with the attendees on understanding the components of the lectures, and with the structure and content of their required essays”, Mr. Breen says. “We also work with them on how to use the We The People textbook and lessons.”

These are the topics covered at the Grand Teton Summer Institute in Wyoming:

- What are the historical and philosophical foundations of the American political system?
- How did the framers create the Constitution?
- How has the Constitution been changed to further the ideals contained in the Declaration of Independence?
- How have the values and principles embodied in the Constitution shaped American institutions and practices?
- What rights does the Bill of Rights protect?
- What challenges might face American Constitutional Democracy in the 21st century?

Attendees also simulate a congressional hearing, and commit to repeating that exercise with their students.

Fourteen of the fifteen Wyoming teachers who teach We The People courses have studied at the Grand Teton Institute. Teachers from Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota and Montana regularly attend.

Richard Hildner lives in Whitefish, Montana and is now retired from the classroom. He is the Montana state coordinator for the We The People program.

“The We The People Summer Institute in Jackson is the best post graduate teacher training opportunity I’ve seen”, Mr. Hildner told me recently. “It invigorated my teaching and was the most important professional development program of my career.”

Holly Kartchner teaches in Blackfoot, Idaho. After her first year of teaching her principal suggested that she attend the Grand Teton Summer Institute and start a civics education program at her school.

And so she did. “I had never been taught by scholars of that caliber before”, she told me. “I already had a strong interest in government, politics and the Constitution”, she said, “but the one-on-one contact with the constitutional experts was intellectually stimulating.”

Ms. Kartchner's We The People student scholars have won the Idaho state competition the last six years in a row.

Few things matter as much in the lives of our children as good teaching. We the People offers good teachers a great subject to teach: the essence of a great country.

It becomes manifest when students at a state competition banquet interrupt the introduction of their teacher to rise and give him a standing ovation, as happened in Wyoming a few years ago.

This great teaching happens in classrooms around Wyoming, and around the country, every day. It is one of our treasures.