

We The People, Part Three by Jack Pugh

The attempt to alter the morals of mankind singly and in detail is an erroneous and futile undertaking; it will only be effectually and decisively performed, when, by regenerating their political institutions, we shall change their motives and produce a revolution in the influences that act upon them.

--William Godwin, *Political Justice* (1797)

Remember when John Boehner became Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives after the 2010 elections? In his acceptance speech he choked up and cried as he achieved the highest honor of his office.

That happened to me in 1982, also in Washington, D.C., in the National Archives. I had just spent a half hour at the display of the Declaration of Independence. I was standing in front of the display of the U.S. Constitution. My emotional response to the documents that founded the nation was overwhelming, and tears flowed.

A high school teacher, there with her class, saw, and came over and gave me a silent hug.

That hug has since symbolized for me the real power of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution: the power to knit us together, friends and strangers alike, in common cause.

For a long time I had understood the Constitution as a great but flawed document, one that took a couple of centuries and a couple of dozen amendments to transform and make the ideals behind it reality for all of our citizens. That view didn't change. But standing in its presence brought the audacity and the genius behind it into sharp focus.

Sometimes a few tears of pride in honor of one's nation, the grandest social experiment ever devised, are in order.

The United States is a vast communal enterprise knit together by the ideas of nationhood and responsibility contained in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. We are what we are because our system of government requires collaboration and cooperation from all of us.

Congress and our political parties would do well to remember that, in this time of ignorant and petulant partisanship.

Educators have always valued collaboration and cooperation as the bedrock of the learning experience. And so it is with the premier program of civic education in this country, the We the People program of constitutional study.

Sara Miller taught the We The People curriculum at Central High School for the first time this year, following in the footsteps of Don Morris and Nate Breen, educators who set a high standard for the teaching of American government.

Ms. Miller was singularly successful. Her student scholars won the We The People state championship and are headed to Washington, D.C. for the national competition.

“Ultimately the program is successful because we have a community to help us”, she says. “Students learn to work with me and Melissa Sipe, our school librarian. We learn to work with them. The students work and learn in teams. We have a team of retired teachers and other members of the community who volunteer their time to work with the students.”

Those retired teachers and community members give up evenings through the school year to coach the students as they prepare for the state and national competitions. It is their critique and knowledge that helps push the students toward expansion of their knowledge and clarity in expressing it.

Wyoming Supreme Court Justice William Hill and D. Reed Eckhardt, Executive Editor of the Wyoming Tribune-Eagle, are We The People volunteers. Justice Hill has participated in eleven state competitions as a judge, and in 2005 judged at the national competition. Mr. Eckhardt has judged the state competition for over a decade and has also judged at one of the national events.

“I have seen discernible changes in the student participants and I am always impressed with the depth of knowledge many of them possess”, says Justice Hill. He points out the improvement new programs and students show as time passes. “As years pass beginning teams return polished and competitive”, he says.

Mr. Eckhardt’s experience echoes Justice Hill’s, as he too has noticed the constant improvement in knowledge and skill of the students over the years. As for being a judge, he points out that “You can’t fake it as a judge. The students know what they are talking about.”

Both Justice Hill and Mr. Eckhardt say that the biggest test of a student’s knowledge of the constitutional question at issue comes during the questioning by the judges.

In 1963 racist terrorists bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, a black congregation, killing four schoolgirls. When Nate Breen later attended services at 16th Street Baptist he was reminded of one of the guiding principles of the American vision: that if our founding principles are to mean anything we have to embrace them and live them.

The We The People program in our schools aims to foster that understanding.

Eleanor Roosevelt spoke of candles lighting the dark. Each small candle lights a corner of the dark, sings Roger Waters. We The People, says Justice William Hill, is a bright light in the darkness.

Long may it shine.