

## Iowa's "Know Your Constitution" Program: "Extra Credit with Lifetime Perks"

By Eiko C. Harris

I recall seeking extra credit in high school as way to get out of doing certain homework assignments. A few extra questions on a test or a one-page essay was a great way to get praises in class, a higher grade, and a personal sense of accomplishment. Well, extra credit has come a long way.

In the state of Iowa, approximately 2,000 high school students challenged themselves this year by participating in "The Know Your Constitution" program ("KYC program"). How many states were necessary to ratify the U.S. Constitution? What branch of government has the power to establish post offices? These are just a few questions these high school students answer as a way to learn about our founding document and to win an educational trip to Washington, D.C. This extra credit reward goes beyond praise, however; it shapes the minds of our youth and establishes better informed citizens.

"This program is one of the premier Iowa Bar Association service projects," says Jeana Goosmann, Iowa YLD President-Elect. The KYC Committee of the Iowa State Bar Association, Young Lawyers Division offers a well-publicized, law-related educational program to Iowa students in grades nine through twelve. The Committee organizes and implements the annual contest consisting of a quiz with fifty multiple choice questions and one essay question that is distributed to high school students throughout the state.

### **Celebrating the U.S. Constitution**

The KYC program was created in 1987 to celebrate the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution and as a way to encourage students to learn more about the Constitution. Between 1,500 and 2,000 students participate annually.

"The program is successful because it exposes people to documents and concepts that may seem intimidating. It grants the opportunity for young adults to learn and understand their fundamental rights so that they become more informed citizens," says the program's co-chair Robert ("Bob") Gainer.

The Iowa Bar Association markets this extraordinary program to thousands of students statewide. It distributes a postcard to a mailing list provided by the Department of Education. These postcards instruct the students to go to a website and download the information or call the Iowa Bar Association.

The fifty questions for the multiple choice quiz are created by the co-chairs of the KYC program from an in-depth pool of questions that have been used over the past twenty-two years. A new essay question is created each year, however. According to 2008–2009 Co-Chair, Lance Lange, the essay question is kept current with whatever is happening in the state and around the country. The KYC Committee strives to create an essay that requires no right answer. The goal is for each student to interpret an issue and formulate an argument that is thorough, well organized, and one each student can intelligently articulate. There is no model answer or any substantive guidelines for the essay question.

Finalists of the KYC program are determined by selecting someone from each of Iowa's 100 legislative districts. The Co-Chairs have help in the selection process from the twenty to twenty-five individuals on the Committee. Once selected, the finalists are invited to attend a formal luncheon in Des Moines, Iowa, with a teacher or school representative. Each finalist receives a medallion in recognition of his or her hard work and are empowered by a message from keynote speakers, which often include lawyers, judges, or senators. Five finalists are then drawn at random.

### **The Rewards**

The five winners each receive a one week, all expense paid trip to Washington, D.C., to participate in a program with the Close Up Foundation that allows the students to meet with political officials and key people in business and media to discuss the most prevalent issues in today's society. This foundation also allows students from different states to interact with one another. It gives students more than a sightseeing tour; it gives them a learning experience to understand how history is valuable to the roles they play in our democratic system today.

"Wendy Boka, Esq., a member of the Des Moines, Iowa YLD Executive Council, who previously was a finalist in the KYC program, attributes this program as the catalyst in her decision to become involved in the legal profession," Gainer says. "[A]ny attorney who participated in the KYC program became an attorney *because* of the program." There can be no doubt that the

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program is inspirational. "Last year the keynote speaker was Iowa Supreme Court Justice Brent Appel, who volunteered his time and asked for copies of the quiz and essay submissions in order to tailor his remarks to the subject matter the students wrote about."

Lange adds "that in many of the rural areas in Iowa many of the students have never had any contact with an attorney. So any contact they have with an attorney through this program exposes young people to some insight into the legal profession and constitutional issues."

**The Impact of Success**

In today's society, success is defined in diverse ways. Whether it is financial prosperity or political power and influence, success is measured by what is most important to the individual. Deservingly this program has received positive feedback from the Iowa community, including letters and postcards from past winners and participants thanking the YLD for the opportunity to learn more about governmental issues and the Constitution. Notably, the KYC program was awarded an ABA YLD subgrant in 2008 and 2009.

As the incoming Chair of the YLD KYC program, Jeana Goosmann doesn't see any reason to stray from the roadmap that has produced such productivity within the state. She believes this program is one of the staples of the YLD and it is highly regarded.

This is a program that should be implemented in every state to expose our young people to the foundations of how our country functions. Many of our youth do not realize that actions and reactions we, as citizens, make everyday stem from our fundamental rights created in the U.S. Constitution. Currently, Iowa is the only state with this type of program.

There are two essential components to starting this program in your community. First, you need a good exam with sound and challenging questions. Second, you need funding, which can be acquired through grants. The chairpersons of the Iowa YLD KC program are cheerfully willing to assist other bar associations with developing similar programs in their areas. To learn more about the program, go to [www.iowabar.org/KYC.nsf/\\$about!OpenAbout](http://www.iowabar.org/KYC.nsf/$about!OpenAbout).

In a society in which procrastination, mediocrity, and undiscovered passion continue to plague some of our young people, this program boldly reveals that young people do seek excellence and strive to become better individuals who will impact this country as well informed citizens and leaders. The state of Iowa and the KYC program continue to impact their communities by serving the public who will in turn serve the world more effectively.

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