



Local students head to National History Day competition

By Susan Danseyar / Journal Inquirer

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Three local students are headed to Maryland in June as members of a team to represent the state in the National History Day competition.

Middle school students Emmett Smith of Ellington and Rachel Mathew of South Windsor won first-place awards in the junior division at the Connecticut Democracy Center's Connecticut History Day competition held at Central Connecticut State University earlier in the month.

South Windsor High School student Rishabh Mohapatra won first place in the senior division.

This year's theme is "Frontiers in History: People, Places, and Ideas."

Emmett, an eighth grader at Ellington Middle School, chose to create an individual exhibit titled "Love Canal: A Precedent for Chemical Contamination Catastrophes and a Legacy of Environmental Advocacy."

The Love Canal neighborhood in Niagara Falls, New York, was the brainchild of William T. Love, who wanted to build a dream community. But the project faltered and eventually turned into an abandoned ditch contaminated by chemical waste that leaked into the basements of homes, causing an abnormally high incidence of chromosomal damage to residents.

Emmett said he found the story fascinating. "I'm interested in environmental history and disasters with chemicals," he said, adding that he looked through online sites for ideas for his project.

He was the only student in his division to do an individual project, for which he had a lot of visuals that he created, including a river and protesters.

Emmett said he learned a lot this year about making exhibits, new ways to find evidence and quotes, and about Love Canal.

"I had never heard of it," he said. "There are so many untold stories from our history that at first glance might not seem interesting but are truly part of making this country."

In preparation for the national competition, Emmett said he is working on making his exhibit better.

Krista Brogle, who teaches Emmett in her gifted and talented class, said he has a strong work ethic and rises up to challenges.

"Over the last two years, he has chosen topics for National History Day that have stretched him as a learner," she said. "He is unstoppable in his mission for progress," she said, adding that Emmett competed in the state competition last year but did not place.

Rachel, a seventh grader at Timothy Edwards Middle School in South Windsor, chose to write a research paper, "Katherine Hepburn: Forging Frontiers in Female Fashion." Rachel said the idea of writing about Hepburn — an actress known for her independence, outspokenness, and often wearing pants — comes from her own clothing preferences.

"I've never liked wearing dresses," she said. "My mother tells me I'm lucky to only have to wear them to church because she had to wear dresses all the time while growing up in India."

Hepburn had a powerful impact on the world by bringing androgynous clothing to women's fashion, Rachel said. "Without her, I wouldn't be able to wear what I do now."

She began working on the paper 10 months ago and did a lot of research on the internet and through interviews.

Rachel said she interviewed museum directors at the Kent State University Museum and the Kate Hepburn Museum in Old Saybrook. She also interviewed several authors who wrote about Hepburn and visited the Old Saybrook museum, where she got an "up-close look of Hepburn's clothing and learned many other relevant facts about her."

John Smith-Horn, the coordinator of the gifted and talented program at Timothy Edwards, said Rachel is a brilliant student who is returning to the National History Day contest for the second year in a row.

"Rachel is also a great friend and supporter of her classmates' efforts," he said. "Another student in our school composed a research paper this year and Rachel was always willing to lend a hand to help."

Smith-Horn said Rachel's peers are organizing a school fundraiser to help her and her family defray the cost of traveling to Maryland.

Rishabh wrote a paper titled "Foreign Mud, Local Landslide: The Struggle Over Economic, Political, and Diplomatic Policies on the Chinese Maritime Frontier in the Prelude to the First Opium War."

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Susan Danseyar

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Susan covers the towns of Somers and Enfield. She joined the JI in May 2021 and graduated from Skidmore College. She recently completed docent training for the Wadsworth Atheneum and hopes to start giving tours some time next year.