

NINTH CIRCUIT CIVICS CONTEST 2026 CONTEST WINNERS



250th Anniversary
of the signing of the Declaration of Independence

LIFE, LIBERTY AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Your Voice. Your Story. Your America.

THE NINTH CIRCUIT'S PUBLIC INFORMATION AND
COMMUNITY OUTREACH (PICO) COMMITTEE THANKS
THE FOLLOWING FOR THEIR SUPPORT:

U.S. COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE NINTH CIRCUIT

U.S. DISTRICT COURT, DISTRICT OF ALASKA

U.S. DISTRICT COURT, DISTRICT OF ARIZONA

U.S. DISTRICT COURT AND U.S. BANKRUPTCY COURT,
CENTRAL DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

U.S. DISTRICT COURT AND U.S. BANKRUPTCY COURT,
EASTERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

U.S. DISTRICT COURT, NORTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

U.S. DISTRICT COURT, SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

DISTRICT COURT OF GUAM

U.S. DISTRICT COURT, DISTRICT OF HAWAII

U.S. DISTRICT COURT AND U.S. BANKRUPTCY COURT,
DISTRICT OF IDAHO

U.S. DISTRICT COURT AND U.S. BANKRUPTCY COURT,
DISTRICT OF MONTANA

U.S. DISTRICT COURT, DISTRICT OF NEVADA

U.S. DISTRICT COURT, DISTRICT OF NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS

U.S. DISTRICT COURT AND U.S. BANKRUPTCY COURT,
DISTRICT OF OREGON

U.S. DISTRICT COURT AND U.S. BANKRUPTCY COURT,
EASTERN DISTRICT OF WASHINGTON

U.S. DISTRICT COURT AND U.S. BANKRUPTCY COURT,
WESTERN DISTRICT OF WASHINGTON

PRIZE MONEY AND OTHER CONTEST COSTS ARE FUNDED THROUGH ATTORNEY
ADMISSION FEES COLLECTED BY THE COURTS TO FUND EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS
FOR THE BAR AND COMMUNITY.

A Word About the Contest

The Ninth Circuit Civics Contest is an annual essay and video competition for high school-age students who reside within the geographic area of the circuit. The contest is sponsored by the Ninth Circuit's Public Information and Community Outreach (PICO) Committee, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit and the 15 judicial districts within the circuit. The contest provides students an opportunity to express themselves through writing and/or video production to learn about the U.S. Constitution and the role of the federal courts, while they research the contest theme.

In commemorating the upcoming 250-year anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, students were challenged to address the theme of "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness—Your Voice. Your Story. Your America." The Ninth Circuit received a total of 1,228 essay and video entries. Of the total 1,043 essays and 185 videos, 45 essays and 44 videos were selected by the districts throughout the circuit to advance to the preliminary round of the final competition at the Ninth Circuit level. Of those entries, 12 essays and 12 videos advanced to the final round of judging. PICO Committee members selected the Ninth Circuit winners, whose names, including district winners and students who placed in the top 12 of the essay and video categories, are listed beginning on page 22 of this booklet.

The contest was open to all students in grades 9-12 in public, private, parochial and charter schools, and home-schooled students of equivalent grade status, in Alaska, Arizona, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Washington state, the U.S. Territory of Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

<https://www.ca9.uscourts.gov/civicscontest>

The PICO Committee is grateful to all teachers, parents and volunteers from the court and bar associations for encouraging students to participate in this contest. We hope that students learned from this contest and gained a better understanding of the Constitution and the federal courts in our American democracy.

Honorable Stanley A. Bastian, PICO Chair
Chief U.S. District Judge
Eastern District of Washington

Public Information and Community Outreach Members:

Chief District Judge Stanley A. Bastian Chair, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Washington

Circuit Judge Roopali H. Desai, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth

Circuit Judge Daniel J. Forrest, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit

District Judge Cathy Ann Bencivengo, U.S. District Court, Southern District of California

Senior District Judge John A. Kronstadt, Ex officio, U.S. District Court, Central District of California

District Judge Krissa M. Lanham, U.S. District Court, District of Arizona

District Judge P. Casey Pitts, U.S. District Court, Northern District of California

Bankruptcy Judge Mary Jo Heston U.S. Bankruptcy Court, Western District of Washington

Chief Bankruptcy Judge Madeleine C. Wanslee, U.S. Bankruptcy Court, District of Arizona

Magistrate Judge Kathleen L. DeSoto, U.S. District Court, District of Montana

Magistrate Judge Autumn D. Spaeth, U.S. District Court, Central District of California

District Court Clerk/Magistrate Judge Heather L. Kennedy, U.S. District Court, District of the Northern Mariana Islands

Bankruptcy Court Clerk Scott A. Yach, U.S. Bankruptcy Court, Eastern District of California

Beth M. Strosky, Keller Rohrback, Western District of Washington

Licia E. Vaughn, DLA Piper, Southern District of California

Johanna Hartwig (Liaison), Executive Director, Ninth Judicial Circuit Historical Society

Robin Cole (Staff), Assistant Circuit Executive, Office of the Circuit Executive

Kari Kelso Ph.D. (Staff), Public Education & Community Outreach Administrator, Office of the Circuit Executive

WINNING ESSAY CONTEST ENTRIES

1st
place

PRISHA YELAMANCHILI DISTRICT OF ARIZONA



Prisha Yelamanchili is a rising senior at BASIS Chandler High School in Chandler, Arizona. She is a motivated student with strong interests in science, public health, and civic engagement, and she enjoys exploring how these fields intersect to address real-world challenges. Through her coursework and extracurricular involvement, Prisha has developed a particular interest in healthcare and the policies that shape access to it.

Outside the classroom, Prisha is actively involved in leadership and service. She serves as a commissioner on the Governor's Youth Commission, where she works with peers and policymakers on substance abuse prevention initiatives, and as president of her school's speech and debate team, mentoring younger students. She is also president of the National Honor Society and a medical ambassador with HonorHealth, organizing workshops and community service and fundraising efforts. In her free time, Prisha enjoys playing the piano and practicing Bharatanatyam, art forms she has trained in for over a decade, often using them to unwind and express creativity. She plans to pursue a career in medicine while continuing to engage in public policy to improve access to healthcare.

From Revolution to Responsibility: Liberty and the Work of Citizenship

In 1776, the Declaration of Independence introduced a powerful claim that reshaped political history: all people are endowed with the unalienable rights to "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." At the time, this statement wasn't merely philosophical rhetoric; American

colonists believed that British rule had denied them the freedom to participate meaningfully in their own government. Hence, liberty represented more than personal independence; rather, it described a political system in which authority derives from the consent of the governed.¹ Nearly 250 years later, the meaning of liberty continues to evolve; nevertheless, its central purpose remains constant. Liberty protects individuals from arbitrary power while enabling citizens to shape the political institutions that govern them.

For the colonists, liberty became essential because British policies increasingly restricted colonial self-governance. Parliament imposed taxes like the Stamp Act despite the colonists' lack of representation.² Colonial assemblies could be dissolved by royal governors; moreover, British troops were stationed throughout the colonies to enforce imperial authority. In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson argued that legitimate governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed."³ This principle drew heavily from John Locke, who maintained that individuals possess natural rights and that governments exist primarily to protect those rights.⁴ When rulers violate this responsibility, Locke argued, citizens retain the authority to alter or abolish the government itself.⁵ Liberty therefore justified revolution, transforming colonial resistance into a moral argument about legitimate political power.

Still, the early promise of liberty remained incomplete. The new nation proclaimed universal rights while denying them to many inhabitants. Enslaved African Americans were treated as property, women lacked political representation, and voting rights were frequently limited by property ownership. Critics soon recognized the contradiction between the ideals of liberty and the realities of American society. Frederick Douglass famously asked how a nation celebrating freedom could tolerate slavery.⁶ His criticism revealed a deeper truth: the principles of the Declaration demanded broader application than the founders had originally envisioned.

Over time, constitutional amendments and legislation attempted to address this contradiction. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery; the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteed equal protection under the law;

the Fifteenth Amendment prohibited racial discrimination in voting.⁷ These reforms established a constitutional framework through which liberty could expand. Historians often describe Reconstruction as the nation's first major effort to reconcile its founding ideals with its social realities.⁸ During the twentieth century, the Supreme Court increasingly interpreted these principles to challenge discriminatory practices. In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools was inherently unequal,⁹ reinforcing the idea that liberty requires equality before the law and energizing the civil rights movement.

Liberty also depends upon protecting freedom of expression. During times of political tension, governments sometimes attempt to suppress dissent; however, constitutional protections limit such authority. In *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* (1943), the Supreme Court ruled that students could not be forced to salute the flag or recite the Pledge of Allegiance, declaring that no official possesses the power to prescribe what shall be orthodox in matters of opinion.¹⁰ Similarly, in *Tinker v. Des Moines* (1969), the Court held that students wearing black armbands to protest the Vietnam War were exercising protected speech.¹¹ These rulings demonstrate a vital principle: liberty safeguards individual conscience even when expression challenges prevailing beliefs.

As a high school student, I see the meaning of liberty most clearly in everyday discussions that take place in classrooms. When students analyze controversial issues or challenge one another's arguments, we participate in a tradition of open dialogue that lies at the heart of democratic society. Conversations sometimes reveal sharp disagreements; nevertheless, those disagreements illustrate the strength of liberty rather than its weakness. Philosopher John Stuart Mill argued that the exchange of competing ideas ultimately strengthens society because it forces citizens to defend their beliefs with evidence and reasoning.¹² Modern civic education scholars similarly emphasize that democratic institutions depend upon citizens who are willing to engage thoughtfully with different perspectives.¹³ In my own experience, listening to classmates with different viewpoints has broadened my understanding of complex issues. Liberty therefore allows students not only to learn information but also to practice the habits of thoughtful citizenship.

Furthermore, modern technology has introduced new questions about how liberty should function. Social media platforms now serve as major arenas for public conversation; consequently, courts must determine how constitutional protections apply to digital spaces. The Supreme Court addressed this issue in *Mahanoy Area School District v. B.L.* (2021), ruling that a school's suspension of a student for a frustrated social media post violated her First Amendment rights.¹⁴ Although schools retain authority to regulate certain conduct, the justices emphasized that youth maintain significant freedom of expression outside school grounds. This illustrates an important lesson: liberty must adapt as society changes. When public conversation occurs online, constitutional protections must extend to those digital forums.

Protecting liberty in the future requires both strong institutions and active citizenship. Courts interpret constitutional principles and safeguard individual rights; however, the preservation of liberty ultimately depends upon an informed and engaged public. Civic education therefore plays a crucial role. When students understand the historical struggles that expanded constitutional rights, they become better prepared to defend those rights when they are challenged. Encouraging respectful debate and promoting participation in democratic processes both help strengthen the foundations of liberty.¹⁵

As the United States approaches its 250th anniversary, the principle of liberty remains both an achievement and an ongoing responsibility. The founders introduced the revolutionary idea that government exists to serve the people. But, they also understood that liberty would require continual effort. Each generation inherits both the progress and the unfinished work of the past. By protecting free expression, expanding equal rights, and encouraging thoughtful civic participation, Americans continue the project that began in 1776. Liberty endures not simply because it was declared long ago; instead, it survives because citizens repeatedly choose to defend it.

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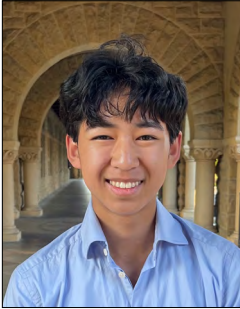
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STANLEY HUANG WESTERN DISTRICT OF WASHINGTON



Stanley Huang is currently an 11th grader at Newport High School in Bellevue, Washington. As a varsity Lincoln-Douglas debater and team captain of Newport Debate, he has developed a deep passion for law, government, and public policy, while also earning recognition at numerous tournaments and as a two-time state debate semifinalist. His passion for problem-solving and critical thinking also extends into the business world through DECA, a business competition club.

He has served as vice president of Newport's DECA Chapter for the past two years and placed twice as a top 10 grand finalist at the International DECA competition.

Outside of competition, Stanley is dedicated to coaching at Bellevue Youth Debate, a local nonprofit that focuses on making debate more accessible for all. Over the past three years, he has mentored dozens of middle school students, teaching them debate skills and confidence to succeed.

When away from school and his extracurriculars, Stanley loves to spend his free time reading a good book, playing soccer, or hiking with friends, with his favorite trail being Lake 22 near Granite Falls, Washington.

Eudaimonia: The Modern Pursuit of Happiness

While most Americans recognize "the pursuit of happiness" as a foundational principle of our constitutional republic, few truly understand what it means. Instead, we often misinterpret the right to pursue happiness as the right to be given satisfaction.¹ When our Founding Fathers wrote this revolutionary concept into the Declaration of Independence, they did so influenced by the Greek concept of eudaimonia, meaning "human flourishing that results from the pursuit of a virtuous or rightly ordered life."² In fact, Thomas Jefferson believed that "health, learning, and virtue

will ensure your happiness; they will give you a quiet conscience, private esteem, and public honor."³ When someone has a right to the pursuit of happiness, it means the ability to both restrain and develop oneself to shape one's own destiny, not endlessly pursue self-gratification.

The belief that each person had an inherent right to pursue happiness was a radical idea in the years leading up to 1776. The Founders themselves were often imperfect in their application of this belief, continuing to oppress enslaved Black Americans in the colonies – a clear contradiction of the statement that these rights were for all.⁴ Still, these ideas were essential for laying the moral roadmap to fight the injustices the colonists faced. In early America, the British government strangled colonial ambition, denying the colonists the freedom to pursue the jobs, education, and individual passions which they viewed as essential for their well-being. This principle first manifested early in the 17th century: as religious dissidents fled Britain and migrated to modern-day America, such as Quakers in Pennsylvania or Puritans in Massachusetts, they did so to pursue a moral life.⁵ In the following century, the pursuit of happiness continued to influence the colonists' actions. Britain's Proclamation of 1763 restricted colonists from settling beyond the Appalachian Mountains, fostering resentment as many were unable to expand their livelihoods and living, a critical vehicle for happiness.⁶ Britain's restrictions also extended beyond territory and into the political realm, as the British King stripped the colonies of self-governance.⁷ This issue was further entrenched by the Intolerable Acts, which suppressed the colonies' sovereignty and reasserted British control.⁸

Economic restrictions also stifled financial independence, including the Stamp Act, which imposed taxes on all stamped paper; the Tea Act, which eventually culminated in the Boston Tea Party; the Townshend Acts, which levied taxes on a variety of goods imported to the American colonies; and the Currency Act, which prohibited the colonies from printing and issuing their own currency.⁹ The right to pursue happiness ultimately became even more essential as the Olive Branch Petition, which was the colonists' last attempt to remedy tensions with Britain and prevent conflict, was ignored.¹⁰

This fundamental principle, written into famous documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Declaration of Rights, was

shaped by John Locke's philosophy that "happiness [is] the foundation of liberty," Montesquieu's championing of the belief of fairness and happiness, and George Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights.^{11,12,13} Without this principle, the colonists would surely have continued to suffer under the British.

While the British Crown's oppression ceased centuries ago, the pursuit of happiness is just as essential in modern America. In my own life, I have come to understand this right as the freedom to meaningfully participate in my community. Through Lincoln-Douglas debate, I explored the worlds of public policy and moral theories, which allowed me to see how ideas shaped civic understanding and collective duties. That understanding led me to spend time mentoring dozens of students every weekend and organizing free debate camps, my efforts to expand civic education. In my eyes, volunteering is the ultimate exercise of the pursuit of happiness, allowing our communities and individuals to flourish. For me, these acts of service are not an activity, but my expression of eudaimonia: fulfillment through community well-being, not personal gain.

Yet, my own actions are built on my parents' sacrifices. Without the freedom to pursue happiness, my parents could never have immigrated to America. They came to the United States for the opportunity to build a new life, the same path shared by millions of other Americans. Like my own service, my parents' journey also relied on the right to the pursuit of happiness.

Still, the ability to pursue happiness cannot exist without a government that ensures it. As citizens, we must fight against laws that violate our individual freedoms, whether through lobbying, protests, or the courts. For instance, we can learn from the examples of *Meyer v. Nebraska* (1923), where the Supreme Court found that a teacher's right to teach a foreign language was inseparable from his own pursuit of happiness, or *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), where the court stated that interracial marriages were included in the right to pursue happiness.^{14,15} More recently, this freedom has been extended by *Carpenter v. United States* (2018) and *Troxel v. Granville* (2000), which prevented unreasonable searches on digital communications (preserving privacy, a prerequisite to happiness) and declared that parents have a fundamental right under

the Fourteenth Amendment for a parent to care for and control their children, respectively.^{16,17} Just as many have stood against obstacles to their freedom, we too must do the same.

Yet, our preservation of this right doesn't need to begin with complex legal systems. We must shift away from the increasingly individualistic culture of modern America and towards preserving civil society by volunteering more time towards community service and promoting civic education. As Alexis de Tocqueville believed, it is through personal virtue that we can become the protectors of our own liberties and the structures to sustain them, subsequently relying less on government intervention.¹⁸ Clearly, a life centered around self-gratification is neither what America was built on nor what our Founders intended. We must align with the true meaning of the pursuit of happiness to sustain the legacy of our complex yet beautiful nation for centuries to come.

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3rd
place

REGGIE CASTRO DISTRICT OF NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS



Reggie Castro is a graduating senior at Marianas High School in Saipan, Northern Mariana Islands. A passionate advocate for STEM equity and civic leadership, Reggie has dedicated his high school career to bridging the opportunity gap for students in U.S. territories. As the president of SOAR (STEM Opportunities and Research) Saipan, he has empowered dozens of his peers to navigate national research and scholarship programs, successfully expanding his school's participation in national competitions 14-fold in a single year.

Reggie's commitment to community-focused innovation is reflected in his award-winning research. He was named a NASA TechRise National Winner for his work in atmospheric monitoring and a Grand Prize Runner-Up at the ISEF State Qualifier for his developments in quantum-inspired gravitational wave analysis. Beyond the lab, Reggie served as a Youth Leadership Academy Scholar with the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies (APAICS) in Washington, D.C., where he advocated for expanded educational investment in the Pacific islands. His work is driven by the firm belief that scientific and academic excellence should be a matter of opportunity, not geographic privilege.

This fall, Reggie is going to college to pursue a B.S. in physics and computer science. Whether he is leading the Student Patent Alliance to protect student innovations, or representing the CNMI in national forums, Reggie remains committed to ensuring that the voices of the Northern Mariana Islands are heard in the national conversation. Outside of his advocacy and research, he is a creative polymath with interests in fashion design, sports and music production.

The Pursuit of Happiness: A Promise Worth Crossing Oceans For

I was born in Saipan — a small island in the Western Pacific, technically American soil — but I grew up in the Philippines. I spent my childhood watching America from a distance. There, America was not a place so much as a feeling — alive in the stories adults told in hushed, reverent voices. The United States, they said, was a land where things were truly possible, where what you worked for mattered more than where you came from. I had a birth certificate that said I belonged there, but the America I knew was built from imagination.

And yet, even from afar, I could sense the gap between promise and reality. Saipan is part of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands — a U.S. territory whose residents are American nationals who serve in the military under the American flag, but cannot vote for President and have no voting representation in Congress.¹ The community I was born into held a version of American citizenship that was, in quiet but profound ways, incomplete. The Pursuit of Happiness was a birthright on my documents — but for many there, the democracy meant to protect it remained out of reach.²

Then, in ninth grade, I came back — not just to study, but to understand what lay beyond the American Dream. In my first year back, I visited Washington, D.C. Standing before the monuments, I felt something unexpected: not awe, but recognition. This country was not finished. It was still being written—argued over, fought for, revised. A nation in the middle of becoming something. And at the center of that becoming was a phrase I had heard all my life without fully understanding: the Pursuit of Happiness.

When Thomas Jefferson wrote those words into the Declaration of Independence in 1776, he was making a philosophical claim as much as a political one. For centuries, happiness had been the exclusive province of the powerful — your station determined by bloodline, title, the country that claimed you. Enlightenment thinkers, particularly John Locke, challenged this: rights were not granted by rulers but inherent to every human being by nature.³ Jefferson enshrined this in the Declaration, proclaiming that among the unalienable rights endowed by the Creator was not happiness itself, but the pursuit of it.⁴ The distinction is everything. The Founders did not promise equal outcomes. They promised every person an equal chance to try.

That idea was dangerous enough to start a revolution. A monarchy has no room for citizens who believe their lives belong to themselves. The Pursuit of Happiness was a direct challenge to inherited power — and remains one of the most radical ideas in history.⁵

Coming back as a teenager — crossing from the Philippines to a mainland I had only ever imagined — I expected to recognize the country I had believed in my whole life. I did not. The culture moved differently, the unspoken rules of belonging were entirely new to me. Back in the Philippines, community was everything — you moved through life surrounded by family and familiarity. Here, I had to rebuild my sense of self in a place that felt both like mine and completely foreign. For a while, I wondered if I had been wrong — if the dream I had carried across the Pacific was just that: a dream.

But those moments of doubt taught me something essential. The Pursuit of Happiness is not a guarantee — it is a framework that demands participation. It asks something of you. Coming from a place where many people never get the chance to chase their dreams at all, I saw with fresh eyes what America actually offers: not certainty, but possibility. Not a destination, but an open road.

That road, I also came to see, is not equally open to everyone. In D.C., I stood before monuments built by people whose own right to pursue happiness was legally denied for generations. I read the words carved into marble — freedom, equality, justice — and felt the weight of how long it took for those words to begin to include everyone. I walked through a city where the distance between those with opportunity and those without was measured in just a few blocks. The promise of 1776 and the reality of today are not the same — and pretending otherwise dishonors the ideals this country was founded on.

As the United States approaches its 250th anniversary, protecting the Pursuit of Happiness must mean more than celebrating it in speeches. It means building conditions that make the pursuit genuinely possible for every person — investing in schools so a student's zip code doesn't determine their ceiling, and creating access to mental health resources and civic education so no one is left behind before the race even starts. And it means confronting an uncomfortable truth: that right now,

hundred of thousands of Americans in U.S. territories like Saipan— people who serve in the military under the American flag — are still denied a presidential vote.⁶ If the Pursuit of Happiness means anything, it must mean no American's voice goes uncounted. That is not a political question. It is a moral one.

Every generation must ask honestly whether the America of today is worthy of the Declaration that founded it — and then do the work of closing the distance.

I came back carrying a version of America built in my imagination across the Pacific. What I found was different — messier and more demanding than the dream I had grown up with. But also more alive. More honest. More worth fighting for. I found a nation still in pursuit — of justice, of equality, of its own highest ideals—and realized the gap between promise and reality was not a reason for disappointment. It was a reason to stay, to participate, to try.

That, I think, is exactly what the Founders intended. The Pursuit of Happiness was never meant to be easy, or finished, or guaranteed. It was meant to be worth fighting for.

Two hundred and fifty years later, it still is.

Notes

1 "APIAVote: Voting Rights." APIAVote, 8 Apr. 2025, apiavote.org/policy-and-research/voting-rights/.

2 Weare, Neil, quoted in "So Who Can Vote in US Elections?" The World from PRX, 13 Oct. 2016, theworld.org/stories/2016/10/13/so-who-can-vote-us-elections.

3 "John Locke." American Battle field Trust, www.battlefields.org/learn/biographies/john-locke. Accessed 3 Mar. 2026.

4 "The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription." National Archives, 4 July 1776, www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript.

5 Sanders, Anthony. "What the Framers Really Thought About Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." State Court Report, Institute for Justice, statecourtreport.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/what-framers-really-thought-about-life-liberty-and-pursuit-happiness. Accessed 3 Mar. 2026.

6 RNZ News. "CNMI Votes 2024: Voters in the US Territory Cast Ballots." RNZ, 5 Nov. 2024, www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/532930/cnmi-votes-2024-voters-in-the-us-territory-cast-ballots.

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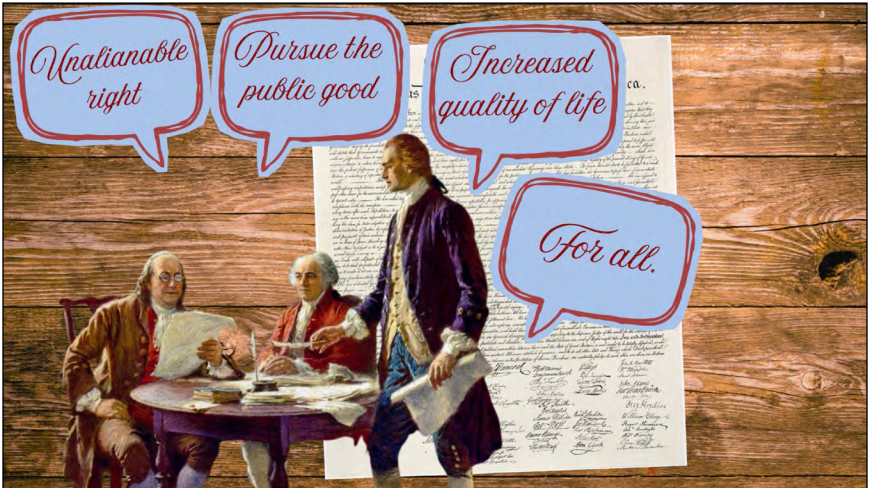
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WINNING VIDEO CONTEST ENTRIES

Winning video entries can be viewed by visiting the 2026 Ninth Circuit Civics Contest website: <https://www.ca9.uscourts.gov/civicscontest>.



1st
place

LALE KUTLU WESTERN DISTRICT OF WASHINGTON



Lale Kutlu is a junior at Lincoln High School in Seattle, where she serves as president of the school's Mock Trial Club. She has competed as an attorney in YMCA Mock Trial since her freshman year, winning the Outstanding Attorney Award at the 2026 King County District Competition and helping lead Lincoln to its first year participating at the Washington State Championship. Beyond mock trial, Lale is an alto saxophonist in Lincoln's Jazz 1 Band and Wind Ensemble. She has been swimming with Cascade Swim Club since elementary school and has competed in her school's varsity swimming team.

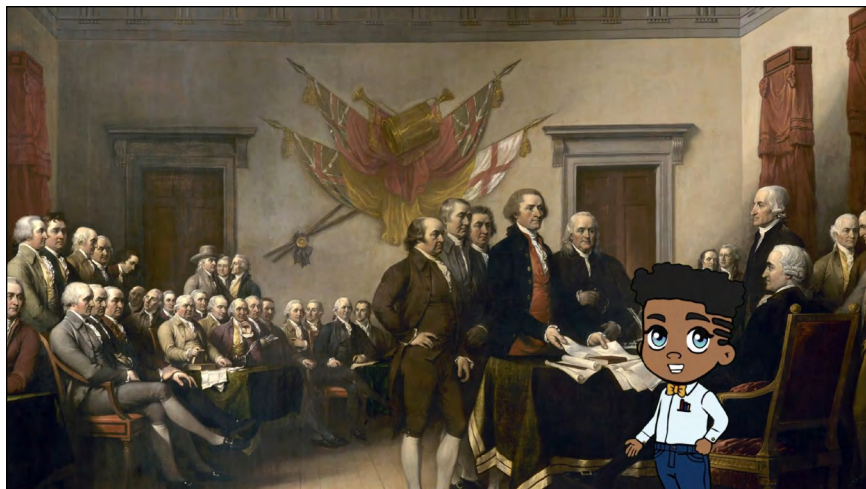
Lale has served on ASB since 6th grade, serving as president in 8th grade, as 2027 class council member since freshman year, and she will be council treasurer in her senior year. She is a 2025 and 2026 Washington delegate to the YMCA Conference on National Affairs (CONA), where participants debate proposals of national importance. She is also a 2026 Washington delegate to the YMCA Changemakers Conference, where students present projects addressing issues in their communities. Lale has advocated for policy change at Seattle City Hall and the Washington State Capitol, focusing on youth mental health, support for immigrant families, and reducing bias in the legal system.



2nd place **AIDAN CHENG**
DISTRICT OF HAWAII



Aidan Cheng is a 16-year-old rising junior at 'Iolani School in Honolulu with interests that span both the arts and sciences. He is actively involved in musical theater and plans to pursue it further while also exploring biomedical engineering, with a particular interest in the frontiers of stem cell research. Outside of academics and performance, he enjoys surfing, hiking, and camping, and competes as an ILH golfer. Aidan values the opportunities he has been given and is grateful for the experiences and support that have helped shape his growth in both his artistic and academic pursuits.



3rd
place

XAVIER GATLIN

WESTERN DISTRICT OF WASHINGTON



Xavier Gatlin is currently a junior at Lakeside School in Seattle. He has had a love for the game of basketball since the age of three and has played on the varsity team for Lakeside since his freshman year. He is involved in the Black Student Union and spends his free time volunteering for the Special Olympics and growing his sneaker and clothing resale store. After high school he is interested in studying business. When he is not on the court or in the gym, he especially loves spending time with friends and family.

TOP 12 ESSAY FINALISTS

► District of Arizona

Prisha Yelamanchili
BASIS Chandler
Chandler

► Central District of California

Aashka Bhuptani
Redondo Union High School
Redondo Beach

Suah Jin
Sunny Hills High School
Fullerton

► Northern District of California

Jasmine Ye
The Quarry Lane School
Danville

► Southern District of California

Natalie Amir-Lobel
La Jolla Country Day School
La Jolla

Deren Erdem
Westview High School
San Diego

► District of Northern Mariana Islands

Reggie Castro
Marianas High School
Saipan

► District of Oregon

Melissa Sobenn
Lincoln High School
Portland

Chloe Zhang
Sherwood High School
Sherwood

► Eastern District of Washington

Ravi Ke
Mead High School
Spokane

► Western District of Washington

Vanessa Brooke
Anacortes High School
Anacortes

Stanley Huang
Newport High School
Bellevue

TOP 12 VIDEO FINALISTS

► District of Arizona

Team: Elijah Aguero, Osvaldo
Gomez & Karl Grosskreutz
Gila Ridge High School
Yuma

► Central District of California

Katelyn Cheng
Trinity Pacific Christian School
Westlake Village

► Southern District of California

Team: Alexia Ortega, Dafne
Sevillano & Samira Suzuki
Chula Vista Learning Community
Charter School High School

► District of Guam

AveMaria Bigler
Notre Dame High School
Talo'fo'fo

Ryan Kong & Reine Sangcap
John F. Kennedy High School
Tamuning

► District of Hawaii

Aidan Cheng
'Iolani School
Honolulu

Chase Yamashita
'Iolani School
Honolulu

► District of Northern Mariana Islands

Team: Michael Guintu, Alleena
Villaluz & James Xiong
Saipan International School
Saipan

► District of Oregon

Team: Emma Lee, Derica Theobald
& Miranda Yesser
Lincoln High School
Portland

► Western District of Washington

Xavier Gatlin
Lakeside School
Seattle

Lale Kutlu
Lincoln High School
Seattle

Team: Sophie Bartscher & Paige
Weiskopf
Seattle Academy
Seattle

DISTRICT WINNERS WHO ADVANCED TO THE CIRCUIT AS FINALISTS

List of students who won in each district and advanced as finalists for the preliminary round at the Ninth Circuit level.

► District of Alaska

Essay Winners: First place (\$1,500) – Liam Cuddy, Robert Service High School, Anchorage; Second place (\$750) – Kenton Scribner, Upstream Learning, Glennallen; and Third place (\$500) Bella Marsh, South Anchorage High School, Anchorage.

Video Winners: First place (\$1,500) – Yedidia Diboue, West Anchorage High School, Anchorage; and Second place (\$750) – Sebastian Young, Homeschool, Wasilla.

► District of Arizona

Essay Winners: First place (\$1,500) – Prisha Yelamanchili, BASIS Chandler, Chandler; Second place (\$750) – Zoe Edelstein, Shadow Mountain High School, Phoenix; and Third place (\$500) – Thomas Westmoreland, Andrada Polytechnic High School, Tucson.

Video Winners: First place (Total of \$1,500) – the team of Vivan Patel, Mihir Sahani and Aayush Shah, BASIS Chandler; Second place (Total of \$750) – the team of Ishitha Kota and Bhavana Amba, BASIS Chandler; and Third place (Total of \$500) – the team of Elijah Aguero, Osvaldo Gomez Flores and Karl Grosskreutz, Gila Ridge High School, Yuma.

► Central District of California

Essay Winners: First place (\$1,000) – Aashka Bhuptani, Redondo Union High School, Redondo Beach; Second place (\$750) – Suah Jin, Sunny Hills High School, Fullerton; and Third place (\$500) – Audrey Chiang, Arcadia High School, Arcadia.

Video Winners: First place (Total of \$1,000) – Mahima Wuppalapati, Portola High School, Irvine; Second place (\$750) – Katelyn Cheng, Trinity Pacific Christian School, Westlake Village; and Third place (\$500)

– the team of Johann Benitez and Anamarys Cordero-Meraz, Alliance Judy Ivie Burton Technology Academy High School, Los Angeles.

The Central District also extends an invitation to their first-place winners, and parent or guardian, to attend part of the 2026 Ninth Circuit Judicial Conference.

► **Eastern District of California**

Essay Winners: First place (\$1,500) – Dylan Hakimi, Harmony Magnet Academy, Strathmore; Second place (\$750) – Dylan Aguayo, Harmony Magnet Academy, Strathmore; and Third place (\$500) – Elliott Rogozinski, George Washington Carver School of Arts and Science, Sacramento.

Video Winner: First place (Total of \$1,500) – the team of Miguel Lopez and Mariana Narez, Peter Johansen High School, Modesto; Second place (\$750), Danny Hussain, Sunnyside High School, Fresno; and Third Place (\$500) – Isaiah Santos, Sunnyside High School, Fresno.

► **Northern District of California**

Essay Winners: First place (\$2,000) – Aiden Tracy, Bellarmine College Preparatory, San Jose; Second place (\$1,500) – Bryce Noh, Evergreen Valley High School, San Jose; and Third place (\$1,000) – Jasmine Ye, The Quarry Lane School, Danville.

Video Winners: First place (\$2,000) – the team of Finlay Hayes and Shai Ring, Burlingame High School, Burlingame; Second place (\$1,500) – Ryan Chou, Westmoor High School, Daly City; and Third place (\$1,000) – Fiona Fisher, Marin Academy, San Rafael.

► **Southern District of California**

Essay Winners: First place (\$1,000) – Milana Mauricio, Mt. Carmel High School, San Diego; Second place (\$500) – Natalie Amir-Lobel, La Jolla Country Day School, La Jolla; and Third place (\$250) – Deren Erdem, Westview High School, San Diego.

Video Winners: First place (Total of \$1,000) – the team of Christian Hwong, Gerardo Perez and Joel Vargas, Herbert Hoover High School, San Diego; Second place (Total of \$500) – the team of Alexia Ortega,

Dafne Sevillano and Samira Suzuki, Chula Vista Learning Community Charter School High School, Chula Vista; and Third place (\$250) – Adriel Regalado, Otay Ranch High School, Chula Vista.

► **District of Guam**

Essay Winners: First place (\$300) – Mariana Castro, St. John's School, Tamuning; Second place (\$200) – Su Jin Oh, St. John's School, Tamuning; and Third place (\$100) – Reynold Borja, George Washington High School, Tamuning.

Video Winners: First place (Total of \$300) – the team of Ryan Kong and Reine Sangcap, John F. Kennedy High School, Tamuning; Second place (\$200) – AveMaria Bigler, Notre Dame High School, Talo'fo'fo; and Third place (\$100) – Frances Elyn Bato, Simon Sanchez High School, Yigo.

► **District of Hawaii**

Essay Winners: First place (\$1,500) – Tianyi Yang, Second place (\$750) – Kaleimaika'i Fasi and Third place (\$500) – Madeline Su. All students are from 'Iolani School, Honolulu.

Video Winners: First place (\$1,500) – Aidan Cheng, Second place (\$750) – Reef Kutaka and Third place (\$500) – Chase Yamashita. All students are from 'Iolani School, Honolulu.

► **District of Idaho**

Essay Winners: First place (\$1,000) – Emma Shafer, Homeschool, Rathdrum; Second place (\$500) – Noah Williams, Canyon Ridge High School, Twin Falls; and Third place (\$250) – Trevor Auger, Capital High School, Boise.

Video Winners: First place (\$1,000) – Maliah Clawson, Boise High School, Boise; Second place (\$500) – Lauren Castaneda, Boise High School, Boise; and Third place (Total of \$250) – the team of Sophia Davidson, McKenna Miller and Aidrian Gilliland, Post Falls High School, Post Falls.

► District of Montana

Essay Winners: First place (\$2,000) – Kaia Pinsondumm, Sentinel High School, Missoula; Second place (\$1,000) – Ada Calhoun, Anaconda High School, Anaconda; and Third place (\$500) – Eva Murray, Anaconda High School.

Video Winners: First place (Total of \$2,000) – the team of Kalli Koteskey and Kaylee Lewis; Second place (\$1,000) – Anabelle Cox; and Third place (\$500) – Caleb Hass. All students are from Foothills Community Christian School, Great Falls.

► District of Nevada

Essay Winners: First place (\$1,500) – Dmitri Grimmatt, West Career and Technical Academy, Las Vegas; Second place (\$850) – Caden Lee, NV Learning Academy at CCSD, Las Vegas; and Third place (\$500) – Avery Gibson, Douglas High School, Minden.

Video Winners: First place (\$1,500) – Yifan Jia; Second place (Total of \$850) – the team of Nevina Min, Brooke Vanderlind and Juliana Vuong; and Third place (\$500) – Abbey Messner. All students are from West Career & Technical Academy, Las Vegas.

► District of Northern Mariana Islands

Essay Winners: First place (\$300) – Reggie Castro, Marianas High School, Saipan; Second place (\$200) – Alleena Villaluz, Saipan International School, Saipan; and Third place (\$100) – Jazzmine Apasan, Marianas High School, Saipan.

Video Winners: First place (\$200) – Jillian Reese Nicdao, Marianas High School, Saipan; Second place (Total of \$150) – the team of Lya Kim, Hyunyu Choi and Yeji Jang, Saipan International School, Saipan; and Third place (Total of \$100) – the team of Alleena Villaluz, Michael Guintu and James Xiong, Saipan International School, Saipan.

► District of Oregon

Essay Winners: First place (\$1,000) – Melissa Sobenn, Lincoln High School, Portland; Second place (\$750) – Chloe Zhang, Sherwood High School, Sherwood; and Third place (\$500) – Maily Quach, Central Catholic High School, Portland.

Video Winners: First place (Total of \$1,000) – the team of Emma Lee, Derica Theobald and Miranda Yesser, Lincoln High School, Portland; Second place (\$750) – Sahara Oguamanam, Forest Grove High School, Forest Grove; and Third place (\$500) – Isbelcy Vidal Tinoco, Forest Grove High School, Forest Grove.

► Eastern District of Washington

Essay Winners: First place (\$1,000) – Yaseen Alazawi, Richland High School, Richland; Second place (\$500) – Carter Pierce, Ridgeline High School, Liberty Lake; and Third place (\$250) – Ravi Ke, Mead High School, Spokane.

Video Winners: First place (Total of \$1,000) – the team of Ashley Conner and Jacqueline Wilkins-Walk, Mead High School, Spokane; Second place (\$500) – Dakota Davis, Spokane Valley Tech, Spokane Valley; and Third place (Total of \$250) – the team of Abigail Hill and Rylee Ware, Spokane Valley Tech, Spokane Valley.

► Western District of Washington

Essay Winners: First place (\$2,000) – Vanessa Brooke, Anacortes High School, Anacortes; Second place (\$1,000) – Stanley Huang, Newport High School, Bellevue; and Third place (\$500) – Akshay Murthy, Bothell High School, Bothell.

Video Winner: First place (\$2,000) – Lale Kutlu, Lincoln High School, Seattle; Second place (\$1,000) – Xavier Gatlin, Lakeside School, Seattle; and Third place (Total of \$500) – the team of Sophie Bartscher and Paige Weiskopf, Seattle Academy, Seattle.

2026 NINTH CIRCUIT CIVICS CONTEST COORDINATORS

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Alex Clausen, Audio & Visual
Specialist, Office of the Circuit
Executive

Chandan Toor, Internet
Administrator, Office of the Circuit
Executive

2026 NINTH CIRCUIT CIVICS CONTEST JUDGES

Final Round

► Essay Judges

Bankruptcy Judge Mary Jo Heston, U.S. Bankruptcy Court, Western District of Washington

Senior District Judge John A. Kronstadt, U.S. District Court, Central District of California

District Judge Krissa M. Lanham, U.S. District Court, District of Arizona

Magistrate Judge Autumn D. Spaeth, U.S. District Court, Central District of California

Licia E. Vaughn, DLA Piper, Southern District of California

► Video Judges

District Judge Cathy A. Bencivengo, U.S. District Court, Southern District of California

Circuit Judge Daniel J. Forrest, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit

Beth M. Strosky, Kehler Rohrback LLP, Western District of Washington

Chief Bankruptcy Judge Madeleine C. Wanslee, U.S. Bankruptcy Court, District of Arizona

Scott A. Yach, Clerk of Court, U.S. Bankruptcy Court, Eastern District of California

*Final Round judges are members of the Public Information and Community Outreach (PICO) Committee.

Preliminary Round

► Essay Judges

U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit Judges—Senior Circuit Judge Carlos T. Bea, and Circuit Judges Ana I. de Alba and Anthony D. Johnstone; Bankruptcy Judge Brent R. Wilson, District of Idaho; Magistrate Judge Nancy J. Koppe, District of Nevada; Magistrate Judge Amy E. Potter, District of Oregon; Magistrate Judge Matthew M. Scoble, District of Alaska; Ruth Thom, Career Law Clerk to Senior District Judge Ralph R. Beistline, District of Alaska; Merry Jean Chan, Chair, Ninth Circuit Appellate Lawyer Representatives, Northern District of California; Ninth Circuit Library Staff—Jodi Kruger, Circuit Librarian; Daniella Garcia, Branch Librarian, Fresno; Julia M. Seiter, Librarian, Los Angeles; and Alexandra Franz-Harder, Librarian, Tucson; and Ninth Circuit Office of the Circuit Executive Staff—Nicholas Jackson, Deputy Circuit Executive; Rob Leung, Operations Specialist; and Kevin Morley, CJA Supervising Attorney.

► Video Judges

Ninth Circuit Judges Mark J. Bennett and Daniel A. Bress; District Judge Sharad H. Desai, District of Arizona; District Judge Fernando M. Olguin, Central District of California; Bankruptcy Judge Victoria S. Kaufman, Central District of California; Ruth Dapper, Lawyer Representative, Southern District of California; Tina Wolfson, LRCC Member, Central District of California; Esther Dunn- Fellows, Attorney Advisor, District of Oregon; Ninth Circuit Mediation Staff—Stephen M. Liacouras, Chief Circuit Mediator, and Circuit Mediators Roxane G. Ashe and Steven Saltiel; Ninth Circuit Library Staff— Susan Caulder, Branch Librarian, San Francisco; Selena A. Lee, Librarian, Anchorage; and Cristina L. Minter, Branch Librarian, Phoenix; and Kari C. Kelso, Public Education & Community Outreach Administrator, Office of the Circuit Executive.

THE PUBLIC INFORMATION AND COMMUNITY
OUTREACH (PICO) COMMITTEE WOULD LIKE
TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE JUDGES, LAWYERS, AND
JUDICIARY STAFF FROM THROUGHOUT THE
NINTH CIRCUIT WHO CONTRIBUTED THEIR TIME
TO ENSURE THE SUCCESS OF THE CIVICS CONTEST
THROUGHOUT THE NINTH CIRCUIT.



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