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Special Report: History Day

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Grady Moore is a senior History major from Charlotte, North Carolina with minors in French and Spanish. After graduating, he plans on enlisting in the Navy and eventually attending law school.

SPECIAL REPORT: HISTORY DAY

By Grady P. Moore

This year, for the first time ever, Harding played host to History Day, an academic competition in which junior high and high school students present their research on a specific aspect of history. The competition, which started in 1976 with the goal of encouraging self-driven and exciting academic research among teenagers, is open to all students grades six through twelve, and draws over half a million competitors annually. The process consists of local, state and national contests and culminates in a nationwide competition in Washington D.C., where each June the nation's brightest students present their essays, dramatizations, documentaries and displays. According to the organization's website, the process seeks to help develop "critical thinkers who can digest, analyze, and synthesize information" and who have the "necessary 21st-century tools, skills and aptitudes" to succeed in their coming academic and professional lives.

The Arkansas competition has traditionally been hosted on campuses within the public university system, most recently by Pulaski Tech, but after the event experienced some logistical challenges last year the supervising board opted for a new location. When Dr. David Adams, an associate professor of history at Harding, became aware of the opening, he was excited to take it on. "[Harding professor] Dr. Harris came to me and told me that we had this opportunity," he said. "She was too busy to do it, and I had participated for four years as a kid, so I took it on." A beneficiary of History Day as a teenager, Adams was eager to help organize the next generation of competitions. He had been a formidable figure in the Oklahoma History Day contests of the 1980's, reaching the state level in three out of his four tries. What happened in his lone absence from state competition? "I had partnered with a friend," he says. "We had totally different visions."

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The event was a convolution of setup, correspondence and organization that was five months in the making. “My first email about the event was from September,” said Adams, checking his inbox shortly after the event in February, “and since then I’ve received over 200 emails about it.” This foresight and communication helped the event run smoothly. “A copious amount of planning was put into this event.”

The organizers weren’t the only ones working hard. The students, who had also spent the last several months preparing, came laden with some tremendously impressive projects. One student, an 8th grader from Cabot, had written a 24-page essay on the contributions of Andreas Vesalius to the field of anatomy in the 16th century. When questioned as to whether she thought the length of her essay was significant for a 14-year-old, she was dismissive. “The bibliography was 2 pages so it was only 22 pages of writing,” she said nonchalantly. “And there were some pictures. It was a lot to do, but we’ve been doing essays for a long time. The first paper I presented was in 2nd grade.” Dr. Adams was impressed by the quality of the work. “Some of these kids really went deep into obscure topics,” he said, “I feel like my history day projects were kind of rookie compared to theirs.”

Needless to say, the event was a big hit among all who participated. “I think it has been a wonderful experience,” said one teacher from Cabot, “They really have learned a ton. They know what a primary source is, they know how to create and format a bibliography, they know how to cite, they understand the importance of historical context and how to write thesis statements. That is advanced stuff for an 8th grader.”

Adams says that the reviews he has gotten from teachers and parents have only been positive. “They talked about how they felt welcomed and felt very warm being here. One of them commented on how kind our students were and remarked that they knew how to talk to younger kids. They said that all their students came out with a smile on their face, feeling like they had won, like they were a winner.” As for the future? “We’re gonna host it here as long as we can,” said Adams with a

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smile. “I only received responses from about 15% of the teachers I contacted, so there’s room for a lot of growth. It’s really exciting.”



Students present their History Day projects, enjoy a game in the common area, and learn more about Harding University’s History and Political Science department.