

Widener University Delaware Law School

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“We the People” Through Young Eyes

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Comment

'We the people' through young eyes

For the second year in a row, Widener University School of Law is marking the new national observance, Constitution Day, by hosting a Web site collection of essays written by Delawareans about the meaning and significance of the Constitution. Last year, we collected essays by government and community leaders in the state. This year, we have essays written by high school students from every Delaware school district.

The students were asked to respond to one of the following questions: (1) What do you think will be the most important factors affecting the strength of our democracy in the 21st century?; (2) Do you think most Americans fulfill the responsibilities necessary for our democracy to flourish?; (3) If you could add one amendment to the Constitution, what would it be and why?; and (4) Which constitutional

right do you especially value and why?

As you will see from the excerpts in the News Journal both today and Monday, the students responded thoughtfully and fervently. None of them takes the long-term survival of our democracy for granted. Instead, they write passionately about how America can thrive only if its citizens are engaged. Time and again, they stress the importance of citizens keeping informed; exercising their right to vote; communicating with their representatives; and willingly performing basic civic obligations such as serving on juries and paying taxes.

These students are not prepared to give Americans a passing grade for fulfilling their civic responsibilities. Instead, their essays are a clarion call for renewed civic engagement. Somehow these young citizens intuitively grasp, as Justice Louis D. Brandeis once observed, that "the greatest men-

ace to freedom is an inert people."

Nor do these students take our constitutional rights for granted. Some understand the importance of these rights because their parents emigrated from countries without these liberties. Others have personally experienced how America has allowed both themselves and their immigrant parents to thrive in their new home.

Quite a few students chose the First Amendment's religious liberties as the constitutional rights they value the most. They seem to revel in America's religious diversity and they cherish the fact that individuals are free to search for meaning without government interference.

Many also expressed deep appreciation for the First Amendment's free speech clause. They recognize that freedom of expression is vital as an end in itself (as one student wrote: "When you live in fear of saying what you

believe, you aren't really living your life"). But they also realize that this right is essential as a means for successful self-governance. Like James Madison, they know that "a popular government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy; or perhaps both."

I hope you enjoy these excerpts and that they spur you to visit the Law School's Web site to read the essays in their entirety. Two hundred and twenty years ago Delaware took the lead among states by being the first to ratify the Constitution. Let us take the lead in the 21st century by being the first state to meaningfully honor the new Constitution Day observance. Let us use this day to reflect upon whether we as a nation are doing our best to fulfill the Constitution's promise to "secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity."

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