



## COURTS 4 CIVICS

Through the Courts4Civics initiative, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit promotes civics education in our schools and communities.

Read the inaugural Courts4Civics newsletter to learn about ongoing initiatives and to find out how you can get involved!

### Fourth Circuit Essay Contest Winners Honored at Constitution Day Program in Richmond

On September 21, 2023, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit recognized the winners of the 2023 Fourth Circuit Essay Contest during a Constitution Day program at the Lewis F. Powell, Jr. Courthouse in Richmond, Virginia.

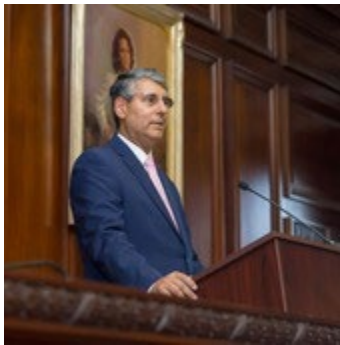
Students in grades 9 through 12 throughout the five states within the Circuit were asked to consider the Constitution in light of the Supreme Court's holdings in *Meyer v. Nebraska* (1923) (striking down a state law that prohibited teaching of foreign languages in public schools) and *Epperson v. Arkansas* (1968) (invalidating a state law that forbade teaching evolution in public schools). Students shared their thoughts on the question: "In light of *Meyer* and later cases, may a state, consistent with the protections afforded by the First and Fourteenth Amendments, prohibit the teaching of certain subjects?"

The first-place winner, Jackson Hamilton, received a \$2,000 prize for his essay, in which he argued that "whether a specific law restricting the teaching of content is unconstitutional

depends on a careful analysis on whether or not the law unduly abridges either the liberty offered by the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment or the protection of freedom of speech found in the First Amendment.” A rising senior at Orange County High School in Orange, Virginia, Jackson was joined by his mother and father, Thomas and Elisabeth Hamilton.

The third-place winner, Ari Cerja, received a \$1,000 prize for his essay, in which he contended that restrictions on the teaching of certain subjects “infringe upon the principles of free expression, hinder intellectual growth, and impede the development of well-informed citizens.” A recent graduate of First Colonial High School in Virginia Beach, Virginia, Ari was joined by his mother and stepfather, Tina Cerja and Keath Beattie, and one of his siblings, “Cross” Cerja.

Chief Judge Diaz also recognized the second-place winner and recipient of a \$1,500 award, Carson Gilmore, a recent graduate of Blacksburg High School in Blacksburg, Virginia.



*Chief Judge Diaz*



*First-place winner, Jackson Hamilton*



*Third-place winner, Ari Cerja*



*Jackson and Ari in front of the Fourth Circuit Essay Award Winners plaque.*



*Jackson and Ari with their families.*

After acknowledging the “hyper partisanship” of today’s society and the lack of discourse that has been exacerbated by online platforms, Chief Judge Diaz expressed that the young people who presented their essays at the program gave him “great hope.” He remarked on the critical role of civics education in “getting our republic back on track,” and reminded participants of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s proclamation that the “real safeguard” of democracy is education.

Chief Judge Diaz concluded with a message of optimism, quoting Senator Mitt Romney’s recent statement that “it’s time for a new generation of leaders” who will “shape the world they will be living in.”

The celebration continued with a reception in the Court’s library and the presentation of a plaque with the addition of Ari’s, Carson’s, and Jackson’s names to memorialize the annual winners of the Fourth Circuit essay contest.

**Watch** the video of the ceremony at this link: [2023 Constitution Day Program](#)

**Read** the winning essays at this link: [2023 Student Essay Contest](#)

## Just Ask a Judge

*Judges:* Participate in a 30-minute Q&A session with students in your community through the [Just Ask a Judge Program](#).

*“I found my participation in the Just Ask a Judge Program to be a breath of fresh air. It is so energizing and encouraging to see students active and engaged and ready to participate in our democracy. In the words of Nelson Mandela, ‘Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.’” ~ Judge Thacker*

*Educators:* [Contact us](#) if you are interested in bringing the Just Ask a Judge Program to your classroom.



*Judge Thacker and her niece, Mary Ella, after Judge Thacker participated in the Just Ask a Judge program at St. Joseph Central High School this past spring.*

---



## Federal Judges Association Civics Challenge

*Educators:* [Join](#) the Federal Judges Association Civics Challenge from September 17 - December 31, 2023.

*C4C subscribers:* Challenge a friend or family member to take the Civics Test given to individuals seeking U.S. citizenship. Study all [100 questions](#), or try a [20-question practice test](#).

---

## Help Us Spread the Word

Promote civics education by forwarding this email to a friend, colleague, or family member!

### About Courts4Civics

An initiative of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, Courts4Civics promotes civics education in our schools and communities, to create learning opportunities and to increase public understanding of how courts work to resolve disputes in our society and to protect our constitutional rights.

Stay connected with Courts4Civics program information and educational opportunities:

[Visit our website](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Subscribe to updates](#)

---

SUBSCRIBER SERVICES:

[Unsubscribe](#) | [Help](#)