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James Irwin junior a winner in national essay contest

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Ashley Zachary, a James Irwin Charter High School junior, beat out more than 24,000 other students for a third place finish in a national essay contest.

She and her teacher, Caitlin Covey, each received \$500 and a paid trip to Washington, D.C., that included an awards gala, Capitol Hill luncheon and tours of the U.S. Capitol, Supreme Court and National Archives.

Ashley said she was surprised she won, especially when she learned how many students submitted essays.

"Generally, English is not my strong point," she said, adding that history and science are her favorite subjects and come easiest to her.

The educational nonprofit Bill of Rights Institute has sponsored the Being an American Essay Contest for five years. Each fall, students are asked to share their thoughts on American citizenship. The past two years, the contest asked students: "What civic value do you believe is most essential to being an American?"

Ashley wrote about "perseverance," referencing Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, who led the first United States expedition to the Pacific Coast.

"It was the one I related to the most," she said.

"Everyday people came to America and settled down, colonizing the wilderness and establishing a country against all the odds," her essay said. "Perseverance, persisting in spite of opposition or discouragement, is one of the virtues that helped America develop into the great nation it is today."

As for the Washington trip, Ashley said she felt at home in the always-bustling city.

It was interesting to see another side of her teacher, she said, and made her realize that having a tough teacher isn't a bad thing.

Covey said the students and teachers had different tours and presentations during the three-day visit.

Covey teaches AP language and composition and Honors 10 English at James Irwin. The essay is a required assignment in English and history classes for juniors. Three teachers plan to continue using the contest as a required essay, she said. Now that Ashley has won and shared about her trip, Covey said she hopes other students will be motivated for next year's round.

The contest typically runs in the fall, with submissions accepted starting in September.

Essays are judged within regions, with Colorado landing in the Mountain Region with Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico and Arizona.

This year, two other Colorado students from schools near Denver received honorable mentions in the Mountain Region.

"The Being an American Essay Contest encourages students to see how vital it is to the future of our country and Constitution that they live out key civic values every day," Bill of Rights Institute Vice President of Education Programs Jason Ross said.

More information on the Being an American Essay Contest can be found at www.BillofRightsInstitute.org.

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