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As the winners of the Bill Of Rights Institute's "Being an American Essay Contest" were announced region by region, Ashe County High School junior Zack Thompson said he could feel the anticipation building.

"They called out the six or seven other areas before mine and the suspense was building," Thompson said. "I just wanted to know what place I came in."

Thompson and his family had travelled to the Nation's capital for a weekend of sightseeing, in a buildup during recognition of this year's winners at an award banquet on March 22.

Thompson, who first heard of the contest from history teacher Marc Gamble, was stunned when he heard his name beside the words "first place."

"Besides my chances being slim [initially], I thought they were slimmer because I didn't think they would consider my chosen value to fit their criteria, but it actually did and they really liked it," said Thompson.

Guidelines for the essay are based on civic values and which one is most important to being an American. According to essay regulations, students must select one of America's founding documents and express how it reflects and embodies the value of what it means to be an American.

Over 24,000 submissions are accepted into the contest annually, a BOR Institute press release stated, and over 80,000 students have tested their merits in writing for the contest over the past three years. Each year, the top three entries are selected from nine different regions nationwide and Thompson, representing the southeast region, learned in February that he was one of the 27 finalists who would be making the trip to Washington, D.C.

In an earlier interview with the AMT, Thompson, who subscribes to the ideals of libertarianism, said he chose the trait of individualism as the subject of his essay because "was the root of all other traits of civic responsibility."

In the opening paragraph of his essay, Thompson stresses the importance of this civic value when he writes, "individualism encompasses individual responsibility, our right to preserve and achieve, the conviction to defend our civil liberties, and our compelling drive to stand up for individual property rights."

On winning the award, Thompson's mother, Beverly Thompson said, "we are extremely proud of him."

Upon arriving in Washington, D.C. on Saturday, March 19, the Thompson family decided to take in a little sightseeing and the history of the area.

"I've never been before, but it was a really good experience," said Thompson. "The monuments were bigger than any of the pictures [depicted]."

"I've always wanted to visit Rome because of the architecture, and the design of the buildings in Washington are very similar."

With his future in educational endeavors never far from his mind while on a mini-vacation, Thompson also took the opportunity to visit Georgetown University and George Mason University."

"He is sort of leaning toward George Mason because they have a really good economics program," Beverly Thompson said.

Along with the honor of receiving a national recognition for his essay, Zack also took home a pretty nice check of \$5,000.

"I'm going to use some of it to purchase books, but the majority will go towards paying for college and savings."