

# Making Every Day Constitution Day

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**PHOENIX** - A new law introduced by Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia and passed by the U.S. Congress requires valley schools receiving federal funds to teach about the Constitution on Constitution Day, September 17th. This year, Constitution Day falls on a Saturday, so it will be observed in valley schools either the week before or the week after. While many educators have embraced this new law as a return to the original civic mission of schools, educating for citizenship, the law has also met some criticism.

Charles C. Haynes, senior scholar at the Arlington, Va. based First Amendment Center, said the new federal mandate seemed an artificial way to teach an essential subject. "My concern is that this will be seen as a quick fix to a deeper problem. The problem isn't that we don't celebrate the Constitution. The problem is that we don't live it in our schools."

However, in Arizona, the Arizona Foundation for Legal Services & Education is teaming with teachers to ensure that the Constitution is alive year-round in Arizona schools through the We the People program.

"The Arizona Foundation for Legal Services & Education's We the People program provides students with a fundamental understanding of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and the values they embody," says Jeffrey Schrade, Program Director for the Arizona Foundation for Legal Services & Education. "We the People helps students understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens in our constitutional democracy."

We the People is taught over the course of a semester in civics or government classes and culminates with a mock congressional hearing. Students prepare for their role as experts testifying on selected constitutional topics by studying the 'We the People' textbook, researching current constitutional issues and reviewing U.S. Supreme Court cases. Community volunteers such as scholars, judges, lawyers, government officials, and business leaders make up the mock congressional committee.

"Volunteers are encouraged to ask difficult questions that probe students' knowledge about the Constitution, but it's rare that they are able to stump the students," Schrade continues.

Mr. Duane Phifer is a teacher at Desert Sands Middle School in Phoenix's Maryvale neighborhood and a mentor teacher for the 'We the People' program. He says Arizona schools do a good job teaching the "Who", "What" and "When" of the Constitution. He likes We the People because it focuses on the "How" and "Why" of the Constitution. When you understand how and why you have your rights, the Constitution becomes personal and relevant, as it did last year for Mr. Phifer's student Evelyn Limon.

Last spring, Evelyn Limon dyed her hair pink just before promotion. As a result, the Principal at Desert Sands decided not to let her attend the promotion ceremony. She complained to Mr. Phifer, her We the People teacher, who told her that he hadn't just expected her to memorize facts about the Constitution in his class, but that she must put that knowledge to work each day to ensure her rights. He sent her out of his office with a challenge to do something about it. Evelyn found several court cases to support an argument protecting her pink hair under Constitutional principles. The next day, she presented her case to Principal Paczosa, who agreed with her arguments and changed his mind, allowing her to attend promotion with her peers, pink hair and all.

Evelyn is now a student at Trevor Browne High School in Phoenix. She says although her pink hair was a passing phase, her experience with the 'We the People' program has stuck with her and inspired her to pursue a career as an attorney. She plans to participate in the Arizona Foundation for Legal Services & Education's Arizona High School Mock Trial program to gain more experience in applying the Constitution and our laws to daily life.

While the Arizona Foundation for Legal Services & Education works year-round to support teaching the Constitutional to Arizona schoolchildren, it is also helping schools comply with the new federal Constitution Day mandate by posting resources on its website and distributing 20,000 pocket Constitution guides to schools free of charge. Teachers are encouraged to visit

<http://www.azflse.org>, or to order pocket Constitution guides by contacting Jeff Schrade, Program Director at (602) 340-7268.

### **About the Foundation**

The Arizona Foundation for Legal Services & Education plays a leading role in preparing Arizona youth for civic responsibility and providing access to justice for Arizona's poor. Each year, the Foundation reaches more than 100,000 Arizona school children through training teachers, school resource officers, and probation officers about our laws, justice system and the foundations of democracy. It is also the center of LawForKids.org, America's largest web site dedicated to teaching students about the law. The Foundation also grants funds to non-profit organizations that provide free legal assistance to the poor so all people in Arizona can have a voice in our justice system. In 2003, the Foundation helped 30,000 families receive free legal assistance and 800 schools to teach law related education.

### **Helpful Websites:**

- Arizona Foundation for Legal Services & Education: <http://www.azflse.org>
- Center for Civic Education: <http://www.civiced.org>
- Arizona We the People: <http://www.azflse.org/WeThePeople>