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Newsletter

Wisconsin Labor History Society

(Affiliated with the State Historical Society of Wisconsin)

7 students win labor history essay honors

Seven Wisconsin high school students were named as winners in the Wisconsin Labor History Society's annual Essay Contest for 2004-2005.

The winners will receive awards ranging from \$500 to \$100. Students compete by completing a 750 word essay on "Unions

Are Important to my Family and Community . . ." The competition was statewide.

Mary Yang, a 12th grader at Wausau West High School, won first prize award of \$500 for her essay that highlighted recollections of a 1971 teachers' strike in her community and also the support that her refugee father had from his union.

Kaitlyn M. Garr, a 10th grader also at Wausau West High School, won a second prize award of \$300 for her essay that highlighted the support her mother received through unions, first as the first woman turnkey hired in a prison and later as a school counselor and member of the teachers union.

Jeremy Lukawski, a senior at Kenosha Tremper High School, won a third place award of \$200 for his essay on the union experiences of his grandfathers and his own father, who is a member of UAW Local 180 at CNH in Racine, and has been locked out during a labor dispute.

Winning essays, Pages 2-4

Hat's Off to Donors (Page 5)

Four students won honorable mention awards of \$100 each. They were:

Michael Gebhard, of Muskego, an 11th grader at Muskego High School.

Brett Schilke, of Neenah, a 12th grader at Neenah High School.

Ashley Johnson, of Columbus, an 11th grader at Columbus High School.

Zachary Morris, of Beloit, a 12th grader at Beloit Memorial High School.

Donations were received from many local unions and labor councils to fund the costs of running the contest and the awards. *(See Donors' Honor Roll on Page 5.)*



School for Workers 80th Anniversary

The University of Wisconsin - Extension Division's School for Workers is celebrating its 80th Anniversary with special programs Friday and Saturday, June 10-11, 2005. It will be held at the Pyle Center, 702 Langdon St., Madison, beginning with an opening session and reception from 2:30 to 8:30 p.m. on Friday. Workshops and programming will continue Saturday, ending with an evening banquet. The School was one of the first established for working people and their unions. For information contact Carol Graham (608-262-4496) or check website: <http://schoolforworkers.uwex.edu>.

Unions Have Been Important to My Family and Community

Mary Yang
12th Grade
Wausau West
High School



Unions are beneficial to employees seeking higher wages, better living conditions, and health care benefits. Unions have made a difference in my community. In the spring of 1971, a strike took place on the streets of Wausau, Wisconsin. Angry employees, including teachers and parents, picketed outside schools throughout the district. The issue was determination of employment; the right to discharge any employee under a just cause or none. After three weeks, the employees succeeded with the help of the union for the right to be discharged only under "just-cause." In the above case, the union worked very hard to meet the employees' rights. Parents, students, and neighbors also supported the cause because they agreed with the issue of "just cause."

The strike of 1971 has made a difference in my community because it allows teachers to work in an environment where they don't have to be afraid of being discharged at any time. For this one reason out of the many other reasons, teachers can enjoy their environment and feel confident in their teaching. This strike has affected me also, due to the fact that the teachers who have made a difference in my life, whether good or bad at their occupation, may not still be here if the union and employees had not succeeded. A gentleman by the name of Mr. James Grinsel, who is currently employed at Wausau West High school, took part in the Wausau School District strike as did all the employed teachers at the time. Grinsel says, "Unions are positive because they give employees the chance to determine wages, hours, and other conditions."

Unions have been important to my family because they have supported us and have protected our rights as employees. Unions have been by my family's side since my mother and father came to the United States as immigrants. My father, Abraham Yang, came to the United States as a refugee in the late 1970's, not knowing any English and having very little education about

the American way of life. Because of my father's lack of English and understanding, he was deliberately discriminated in his work environment. Other employees would jokingly chase after him with wooden sticks used for window frames, and try to frighten him.

Fortunately there were some kind employees who witnessed the harassment that was inflicted upon my father. Those kind employees understood the union's purpose of maintaining a safe working environment. My father was informed about the union, and little by little he began to understand how the union worked to defend his rights as an employee. My father had the advantage in the next encounter with the same employees because this time he knew he had union support. He reported the situation to his boss who then sent out a warning to the employees. That was their first warning, and if they were to cause any trouble again their employment would be taken from them. My father was very happy that members of the union actually listened to his complaint and that the union was there to support him.

In Laos, his native land, there was no such entity as a union. If someone was treated unfairly, they had to deal with it themselves. Coming here to America and being able to have a union crew beside him made him very happy, just as it does to my family.

Unions have been important to my family and my community because they have been loyal to us as members and have worked very hard to defend our rights as employees. I believe that in the future when I have a family of my own, unions will make a difference in my family's life just as they have made a difference in my family and community. Unions are a positive role-model for other organizations because they are a democratic organization, meaning that the members get to vote on what they believe are the important issues and principles. Unions work through collective bargaining; they determine wages and conditions through union-democratic organizations. This allows us as members to have a say in what we want.

Without employees, unions wouldn't be here. But without unions, employees wouldn't get as much out of the wealth that they produce for their company. Unions and employees have been working together for a very long time, and without each other, both would not be where they are today: successful.

Wisconsin Labor History Society Essay Contest Second Prize Winner - 2004-05

**Kaitlyn M. Garr
Athens
12th Grade
Wausau West
High School**



Unions have been important to my family and my community because they try to ensure the best possible wages for their workers and they try to keep good health insurance benefits. This means people have more money to spend to keep the community's economy good. Over the years, many people have actually been killed for fighting for their rights, such as fair wages and safe jobs. I am grateful for what these people have unknowingly done for my family and my community. I am proud to be a daughter of a union member!

Years ago, my mother was the first woman hired to work beyond the turnkey of an all-male, maximum security prison. Needless to say, it was a hostile environment for her; not from the inmates, (although I have heard some unpleasant stories) but from the men who worked at the prison before her and did not want women working there. When the management violated my mother's basic rights, not only by discriminating against her because of her gender, but also by putting her safety in jeopardy, my mother depended on her union for help. My mother continued to work at the prison for 4 1/2 years, mostly, she says, because she didn't want the management to think they could "scare" her out of the job. However, she also wanted to help ensure a fair and safe working environment for those women hired after her. I laughed when I heard about the song "Rebel Girl" by Joe Hill written about female union workers in 1914, because it made me think about my mom staying in a difficult situation so that it would be an easier road for those women hired after her. "Her hands may be hardened from labor, and her dress may not be very fine; But a heart in her bosom is beating, That is true to her class and her kind. . . . It's great to fight for freedom with a Rebel Girl!" If it weren't for her union, my mother says, she wouldn't have lasted at that job for even three months!

Making a drastic change from correctional counselor to school counselor, my mom has been a member of the teacher's union for the past eighteen years. I know my mother is not shy at union meetings when she speaks up for her or other's rights. Although "majority rules" votes are sometimes necessary with unions, my mom always says that the members of a union have to have a

"one for all and all for one" mentality before they vote. With unity and numbers, there is strength, and that is what a union needs to be successful. When the government forced the Qualified Economic Offer (QEO) on the teachers, it was the union that helped negotiate a better wage. When health insurance costs began to soar, it was the union that worked to help teachers keep their benefits. Although our elected officials have tried to undermine public schools and teachers, the teacher's union continues to fight to bring respect back to the profession. A union isn't strong without the membership. My mom has often included my siblings and me in union activities. For instance, my siblings and I have attended school board meetings with signs around our necks saying "End QEO", or "Give my mom a fair wage". We have, as a family, along with other union members, picketed at other high schools during parent conferences, letting people know that the teachers were working without a contract. We have also picketed and rallied against the QEO. Many times I have seen my mom leave early for work, just so she can stand outside the school with her union members to show solidarity by "working to contract" and not entering the building until actual starting time. I have seen my mom wear all black to work every Friday for months as a sign that the teachers were working without a contract. It seems that in the last fifteen years, there has been a lot of trouble for teachers, but the unions and their membership have not given up and they continue to fight to make teaching the great profession that it truly is. In fact, someday I hope to be a teacher and I will also be a proud union member!

Ten years ago, my father worked as a dialysis technician without a union. When he became infected with HCV (Hepatitis C) from a patient, there was no union to ensure his safety and his rights. Instead he was told by his administrators, "Go see your doctor". His workman's comp claim was denied and he had no union to defend him. When he became so ill that he could no longer make it to work everyday, he was simply "let go" without any long-term disability benefits. There was no union to fight for my father's basic rights, and other workers were hesitant to get involved because they feared retaliation from the administrators. Instead, my parents were forced to hire private attorneys and the law suit is still unsettled after 10 years.

Unions have been tremendously important to my family. My three siblings and I, and also my father, are so fortunate that my mom has a union that ensures her basic rights, gives her the power to have a voice in how her job works, and makes sure she is treated equally and fairly.

Wisconsin Labor History Society Essay Contest Third Prize Winner - 2004-05

Jeremy R. Lukawski **12th Grade** **Tremper High School** **Kenosha**



Unions have been important to my family and my community because they have provided us with employees that have superior skills that allow the union employers in my town to compete in the global market place. Manufacturing is no longer a job that can be offered to careless unskilled men and women. Safety and training are just two of the factors that allow a union employer the ability to produce profits while also increasing their market share in this competitive world that we all live in today.

My grandfathers were both union employees. One worked as a mechanic for the Wisconsin Natural Gas and Electric Company, and the other one was a policeman for our town. My grandfathers had union jobs that provided their families with health care benefits and a stable income. My father is a journeyman tool and die maker. At age 16, he started working part-time in a tool and die shop as a sweeper. When he graduated from high school, he was offered a job as an apprentice union tool and die maker. Through the years, he has been employed with several different companies. His former employers have sold their companies to foreign companies, forcing American companies to close their doors. He now works for another foreign-owned company that has recently established an unacceptable benefit package for its present employees. After a long period of unsuccessful negotiations between the company and the union, my father is now walking the picket line. This particular company has decided to remove and reduce many of the benefits that union members have relentlessly fought for over the last 75 years. My father's union is very important to my family, especially now. I'm now a senior in high school making preparations for college and a promising future. The benefits that my father's union is presently providing my family with while he is on strike is ensuring my family's safety and security to continue to live our lives without fear of losing our home. These benefits also provide me with security and hope that I won't have to change my dreams and hopes of going to the college of my choice. His union is providing us with health care insurance and a strike benefit that while small, is enough to survive on until they settle on

a contract that is fair and equitable for both the union employees and the company. Without the union standing up for my father's job, we would probably be forced to relocate to another community, and he would have to start over with another employer. The foreign company my father presently works for wants to take their employees backwards forty years in wages and benefits. This would create a hardship on my family, making it impossible to live in the location that we presently do now. Another company that is in the same market place as my father's company is owned by American businessmen who have union employees with good contracts. This company is showing profits of record proportions over this last quarter. I truly feel that without my father's union there to fight and negotiate a fair contract for my family, my community would lose another company to foreign investors.

The union my father belongs to supports our community in many ways. The donations made by the members of the union to charities like the United Way are unsurpassed by other employees and their companies in our town. These donations help many charity organizations give the less fortunate a chance to weather hard times. The community also benefits from many of the clothing and food drives my father's union supports. Last year, my family was able to give a needy child a Christmas gift arranged by our union-supported charity organization. This child most likely would not have had a Christmas gift to open on Christmas Day. It's the little things like this that pulls a community together, while at the same time, puts a smile on a young child's face and shows them the true meaning of love, sharing, and compassion. My two sisters, who are younger than myself, will receive a Christmas gift from the union this year while my Father is on strike. I know that my parents have always tried to give my sisters and myself the most memorable holiday that they could. Even though this year my parents will not have the income to provide all the holiday activities and trimmings that we have been accustomed to, I know deep in my heart how much my parents love us, and that is all I need to have an enjoyable Christmas.

In this essay, I have tried to show how my father's union has helped my family and my community. While my family's future is uncertain at this point, the one thing that I feel confident about is my father's abilities. Knowing that my father is a union journeyman and skilled tradesman with skills and abilities learned in union jobs, the fear of the future and the uncertainty of the unknown doesn't seem so scary. God bless this country, and thank-you U.A.W. of America.

'WE SHOULD BE PROUD OF THEM'

(The following are excerpts from a column written by John DeRosier, a WLHS board member, a DALU Local 24111 member and EauClaire Labor Council delegate, in the LaCrosse Union Herald)

Those kids in high school. Are all of them irresponsible? No.

Many high school students are smart, intelligent and responsible. They do their homework, study hard and even write award-winning essays. Some of them write about labor history and receive both recognition and a few bucks to boot, ranging from \$100 to \$500, courtesy of the Wisconsin Labor History Society (WLHS).

Two excellent examples came from Sarah Andreski, a sophomore at Merrill High School, and Amanda Lorraine, a senior at La Crosse Logan High School. Both students described why unions have been important to their respective families and communities in the contest for the 2003-2004 school year.

Sarah Andreski described how unions worked to get their members decent wages and benefits. She added that unions made certain their members had safe working conditions and were not taken advantage of. She wrote how her father and mother, both union members, educated her on how important it is to be a union member. But it wasn't easy, getting those wages, benefits and respect on the job. At times union members had to strike, but the results were "...fair pay, safer conditions, specific contract language and a more reasonable work day."

She wrote in part: "I had the privilege to see what goes on at a picket line. What I saw was a group of committed people all united to achieve a goal. If not for the labor unions going up against the corporation to fight for fair wages and working conditions, my dad may have been without a decent paying job, or working too long hours under hazardous conditions."

Writing about why unions have been important to her family and community, Amanda Lorraine stated that efforts by union laborers increased the benefits, the wage scale and working conditions for both her family and many other families in her community and the U.S. She went on to describe how "...union members earn 28% more than nonunion members in wages alone and if you include benefits, it's 36% more." Amanda added her father's union awards union members and

DONORS HONOR ROLL WLHS 2004-2005 ESSAY CONTEST

The following labor organizations contributed a total of \$1500 to help provide cash prizes and support the annual labor history essay contest among Wisconsin high school students. Thank you to the following:

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees:

- Council 40
- Local 323
- Local 796-A
- Local 2748

Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers:

- Local 7-213
- Local 7-0152
- Local 7-232

Int. Association of Machinists:

- Lodge 1377
- Lodge 66

Washington County Labor Council

Wisconsin Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals

National Association of Letter Carriers

- Branch 2

Construction and General Laborers Local 464

Int. Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 2304

Graphic Communications Local 577-M

their children with thousands of dollars in scholarship money, based on selection by an independent panel of educators.

The next time you read or hear about some kid(s) arrested on drug charges, or drunk driving, or you have some youngster tailgating you, and you think, as I sometimes have, that today's kids are spoiled, think again.

I haven't even met Amanda Lorraine or Sarah Andreski and I'm already proud of them. I'm willing to wager their parents are too.

Every year, the WLHS is offered an opportunity to set up a display at the annual conference of the Wisconsin Education Assn. Council. The 2004 display at Madison is shown here.



Catherine Conroy honored by feminists

Catherine Conroy, a founder of NOW and the Coalition of Labor Union Women, was among 15 women honored by the Veteran Feminists of America at a 2004 event at the University of Illinois-Chicago.

Sister Conroy was a member of the Communications Workers of America, was the first woman elected to the Wisconsin State AFL-CIO Executive Board and was featured in the 1998- WLHS-published book, "Like Our Sisters Before Us: Women of Wisconsin Labor." Sister Conroy died in 1989 of cancer at age 69.

Republic Steel Memorial Day Rally May 29

The Illinois Labor History Society has announced the Republic Steel Memorial Day 1937 Massacre will be commemorated at a rally and meeting Sunday May 28. The event will be at Memorial Hall, 11731 S. Avenue "O" in Chicago. For information contact 773-646-4370.

100th Anniversary of IWW

The International Workers of the World (IWW), often known as the 'Wooblies,' is celebrating its 100th Anniversary this year. Often controversial, the IWW has been in the forefront of many labor fights, and has a colorful history. A number of events are being scheduled throughout the US. The

founding convention was in Chicago in June, 1905, and a Centenary Celebration is scheduled for June 23-25 there. For information check www.iww.org/centenary.

25th Anniversary Fete set for AFT's Nurses Group

The Wisconsin Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals (AFT) is holding a 25th Anniversary Celebration on May 6, 2005 in Milwaukee.

Check Our Website

www.wisconsinlaborhistory.org

- Ready access to all sorts of information about labor history.
- Links to popular sites.
- Pictures, bibliographies

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NEWSLETTER

For Society members and friends

Wisconsin Labor History Society

(Affiliate, Wisconsin Historical Society)

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