

Freedom of Information Day Celebrated in Winsted

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Winsted Voice

By Claire Nader

The Shafek Nader Trust for the Community Interest sponsored the third annual Freedom of Information Award in a ceremony on Wednesday, March 16, 1994 at 7 p.m. in the auditorium at Northwestern Connecticut Community College. This year Attorney General Richard Blumenthal was the guest speaker. Mrs. Rose Nader presented the awards to the three winners.

March 16th is the anniversary of James Madison's birthday and it is celebrated as Freedom of Information Day throughout the country. Why Madison? Because he was a great advocate of the right of citizens to information about their government. Read his seminal words.

A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance; And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.

Students who participate in this event signify that they mean to be their own governors.

For the past three years Community Lawyer Charlene LaVoie has presented information on the Freedom of Information laws to The Gilbert School students. The students then compete in a quiz and essay contest. Each year three award winners are selected based on their knowledge of the law and its importance. This year students were asked how they would use the Freedom of Information Act to obtain information which would benefit public health or safety. There were a number of thoughtful essays and all are to be commended for their effort in participating.

As a part of this year's celebration a video program about the federal and state Freedom of Information laws was produced by the Office of the Community Lawyer and students from The Gilbert School. This video program includes Winsted native and citizen advocate Ralph Nader and Theresa Amato, Executive Director of the Citizen Advocacy Center in Elmhurst, Illinois and formerly the Director of the Freedom of Information Clearinghouse in Washington, D.C. The program is introduced by Gilbert School students Jenny Brooke Condon, Jen Parmelee and Melissa Welton and was taped and edited by Per Rasmussen and Michele Caine of Mad River TV.

The third place award winner, Tom Clapper, wrote about checking into the safety records of nuclear power plants to determine when they had been inspected for defects. Second place award winner, Christopher Hurley, wrote about the problems of electromagnetic fields from high voltage power lines. First place award winner, Jenny Brooke Condon, wrote about obtaining information from the Federal Drug Administration on research and testing of consumer products and pesticides.

Each of the winners received a cash award and a copy of the book, *The Big Boys*, by Ralph Nader and William Taylor which profiles the chief executive officers of major U.S. companies and describes power and position in American business.

The Attorney General stressed the importance of understanding the freedom of information laws because, as he said, "The more information available, the less government has to hide, the better off we all are and the freer we will be." He commended the Freedom of Information project in Winsted and supported our plan to take it county and statewide.