

# National History Day: Student Historians

Ann Claunch

In 1987, Hunter Scott, a curious sixth grader from Pensacola, Florida, embarked on a historical research project that would not only change his life but the history books themselves. A lover of the movie *Jaws*, Hunter was intrigued by the brief recounting of a shark attack on the survivors of the sinking USS *Indianapolis* during World War II.

After investigating the 1945 event, Hunter learned that the captain of the *Indianapolis* had been court-martialed for his performance during the top-secret mission and later committed suicide. Hunter's curiosity about the story sparked his work as a historian. He read military reports, court transcripts, and conducted his own interviews with surviving crewmembers and friends of the convicted captain, Charles B. McVay. Hunter concluded that the captain was not at fault. Thus, he set out on his own mission to reverse what he called "a conviction of negligence." Hunter appeared on national television, lobbied Congress, and worked on the case for five years. On July 13, 2001, his campaign reached a successful conclusion when the secretary of the Navy changed Captain McVay's military record, absolving the skipper of any guilt in the loss of the ship. What began as a historical research project for National History Day, led Hunter to become an expert witness for Congress, and changed the lives of those involved forever.

A National History Day project on the Little Rock Nine started in 2003, when Heather Jurgensen was struck by a famous photograph of Elizabeth Eckford surrounded by screaming, spitting crowds and blocked from entering school by the Arkansas National Guard. As a National History Day participant, Heather met and interviewed this member of the Little Rock Nine for her historical research project on desegregation. Through her research, Heather carefully examined the historical context of the time and, like a

professional historian, presented multiple perspectives in her research. The girl's curiosity and respect inspired Eckford to make her first public appearance in 40 years in order to attend the National Contest where Heather competed.

In 2005, Edgar Ray Killen was convicted of the 1964 murders of three Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) volunteers. The conviction was made possible by three high school sophomores from Chicago—Brittany Saltiel, Sarah Siegel, and Allison Nichols—along with the help of their teacher Barry Bradford and investigative reporter Jerry Mitchell. In the summer of 1964 (known as Freedom Summer), James E. Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman had traveled to Mississippi to help African Americans gain the right to vote. Because of the student-conducted research, we now know with certainty that the Ku Klux Klan, aided by local police, kidnapped and brutally murdered all three men.

The girls began the case by reading the police and FBI records. After extensive research through newspaper archives, police transcripts, and a phone interview with the suspect, Killen, they formed an interpretation based on the new evidence and began to rally support from the public, the victims' families, and law enforcement agencies to have the case reopened, which ultimately concluded with a guilty verdict for Edgar Ray Killen.

These stories leave little doubt that historical research for students is transformative. It challenges students to ask questions that have been left unasked or

unanswered by history books. History becomes the students' story to tell and turns into much more than an assignment due at the end of a grading period. This student's testimony illustrates how historical research transformed her as a student and as a person:

When I chose to do research on the dropping of the bomb on Nagasaki, I had no idea what that would mean. Through the research I learned to write better and where to find answers for hard questions, but the most important thing about the research is it taught me about my family. My grandmother, who was a survivor, had never talked about her experience to my mom. When I interviewed my grandmother, my mother asked more questions than I did. Her story I would have never learned in a history book.

The article that follows this one, tells the story of how four students from Uniontown, Kansas, discovered the forgotten story of Irena Sendler, a social worker at the time of the Holocaust, who saved the lives of 2,500 children from the Warsaw Ghetto. From their research, the girls created a historical performance for National History Day that highlighted Sendler's story. Their performance and research were so well received that the girls, and their teacher, Norm Conard, continued past the due date of the research assignment and built a non-profit organization where proceeds were placed into a trust fund to care for the 90-year-old heroine until her death in 2008. 📖

ANN CLAUNCH is the director of curriculum for National History Day, and a professor emeritus at the University of New Mexico. She can be reached at [ann@nhd.org](mailto:ann@nhd.org).