

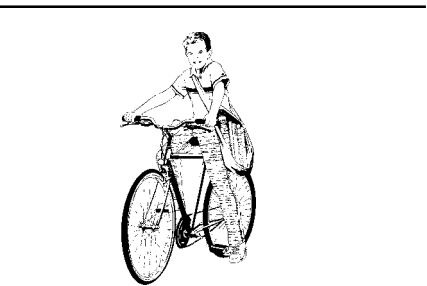
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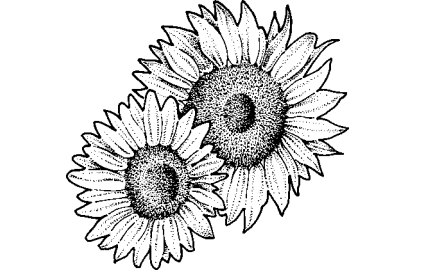


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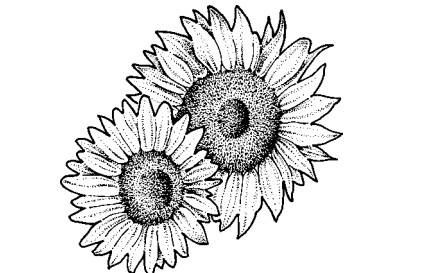


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Michael Smith spent hours working on the Veterans of Foreign Wars Voice of Democracy speech that won him local and district titles. He took the speech, inspired by his grandfather, José “Joe” Diaz, on to the state competition, and although he didn’t win, plans to try again next year.
Photo by Kathryn Burke/The Goodland Star-News

Sophomore spreads voice of democracy

By Kathryn Burke
The Goodland Star-News

What does freedom mean to you?
To Michael Smith, freedom is the embodiment of the sacrifices his grandfather, José Diaz, made in World War II.

That’s part of what Smith, a 16-year-old Goodland High School sophomore, talked about in his winning speech for the Kansas Veterans of Foreign Wars Voice of Democracy program.

The three-to-five-minute speech won Smith the local and district titles and sent him to a banquet in McPherson last month



Smith

to meet the nine other winners from around Kansas.

This year’s theme was “celebrating our veterans’ service,” and recalling his grandfather’s life, Smith celebrated a veteran who was dear to him.

He said Diaz was an ammunitions specialist in the 153rd Armored Division in the war.

Although he heard only a few stories, Smith said his grandfather always focused on the happier side of war.

“The sanctity of family is a far better thing to remember than the images of war,” he said in his speech.

The talk begins with a first-person account of Smith walking into his living room and noticing the American flag that was presented to his grandmother at his grandfather’s burial almost four years ago.

“One of the things I never said to him, but probably should have, was ‘thank you,’” Smith said in his speech.

Smith said the flags that hang in homes and offices serve as a salute to veterans.

“I see the celebration of our veterans in every corner of the country,” he wrote.

He said he didn’t know much about his grandfather’s experience in war but through talks with his uncle, Joe Diaz, Smith finally heard some of the stories.

“I learned of his stories of friendship, of how people around you who you have come to love, can be taken so quickly from you because of an ominous evil,” he wrote in the speech.

He said the accounts of war taught him that compassion, the same kind he learned

Students use pens, voices to celebrate America

Students have a chance to use their pens and voices to celebrate America with the Veterans of Foreign Wars Patriot’s Pen essay program for sixth through eighth grade, and Voice of Democracy oratory contest for ninth through 12th.

JoAnn Wahrman, school librarian and an auxiliary member and post chair for the programs, said the contests are a way for the veterans to work with kids.

She said each VFW post sponsors a local winner to go onto the district contest. District winners can go on to state

and then national competitions.

She said at nationals, the students compete with 54 others from every state and around the world.

Students can win scholarship money at all levels, with the top prize of \$25,000 in the Voice of Democracy nationals. National competitors win a trip to a banquet in Washington.

Wahrman said the new theme for both competitions will be out in the first part of April.

She encouraged students to start thinking about their entries soon.

Even with so many extra activities, Smith still squeezes in a part time job at the radio station. He reads weather, public service announcements, news and sports on air at KLOE, KKCI and KWGB radio here.

For his speech, the contest requires students to submit entries on a compact disk or tape. Smith said he practiced his inflection, placing emphasis on important words or phrases.

His tape won the local contest sponsored by the Goodland VFW Post and Auxiliary. The speech went on to the District 9 competition, which covers the area from the Colorado boarder east to Victoria and from Sharon Springs north to the Nebraska line, where he won against 12 other competitors.

At the state competition, Smith said, the nine finalists spent an hour getting to know each other. He said they all attended a banquet where they introduced themselves and their families.

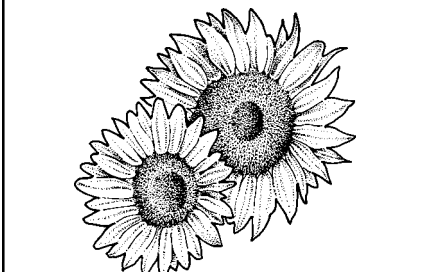
At the end of the evening, he said, they learned that the judges had chosen Kelsey Fowler of Emporia, and she read her speech.

JoAnn Wahrman, librarian at Goodland High School and a member of the auxiliary, said they were proud of Smith’s speech and hope to see him compete again.

“He did an excellent job presenting it,” she said. “We look for him to be a state winner in the next few years.”

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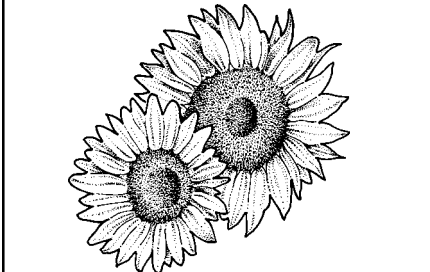
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