Press Release

High School Students from Ozone Park and Hastings Tie for First Place in Sierra Club Environmental Essay Contest

Two high school seniors tied as first-place winners of an environmental essay contest sponsored by the Sierra Club Action Network and the Atlantic Chapter of the Sierra Club, Population and Consumption Committee. Competing against high school juniors and seniors around the state of New York, Lisbeth Nunez of Ozone Park, Queens, who attends LaGuardia High School in Manhattan and Jeb Polstein of Hastings-on-Hudson, who attends Hastings High School tied for first place by writing the most compelling and insightful essays on the topic of *Are There Limits to Growth? Population, Consumption and the Environment*. Mr. Polstein focused his essay on the sensitive issue of population, recognizing the big picture that the growth in world population (now over 7 billion) contributes to nearly all other environmental challenges we face on the planet. Ms. Nunez emphasized the consumption component, concentrating her essay on one of our most vital resources – water.

Both Mr. Polstein and Ms. Nunez sited Thomas Malthus, the early 19th century demographer, as having been the first one to warn that “exponential increases in human population would eventually outpace our capacity to produce food,” as stated by Mr. Polstein, who went on to explain that “with our continual overuse [and abuse of water, and topsoil as well as] climate-induced stresses, it may require a second green revolution for farmers to produce enough food to sustain the world’s population growth for another century.” Nunez provided the detail of overconsumption and degradation of water resources in the developing world (specifically China and India) as well as in the US: “the Ogallala Aquifer, the world’s largest [underground] reservoir located in the Midwest United States...is...being
depleted at rates of up to 40 times higher than the natural recharge rate... As populations increase, the demand and consumption of water, in domestic, agricultural, and industrial fields, will increase as well.”

Mr. Polstein wrote: “If population continues to grow exponentially, humans will simply run out of resources and begin to die off. Today's scientists and engineers are continually improvising methods to delay this inevitability, but after a certain point these will prove futile, and may even backfire. Therefore, population growth can slow and stop one of two ways: either by mass starvation, first of the poor, as resources become ever more scarce, or by a simple but substantial reduction in fertility rates.”

Both Mr. Polstein and Ms. Nunez offered solutions to these issues. Mr. Polstein wrote: “Obviously, curbing fertility rates is the more attractive option [compared to mass starvation]... a preemptive strike to minimize the tragic effects of overshooting our environment’s carrying capacity... Women should be educated and empowered to make their own reproductive choices, especially in developing countries, and encouraged to resist harmful cultural norms... The ambitious goal of giving women choices could bring fertility rates below replacement level, according to surveys.” Ms. Nunez suggests world-wide efforts to reduce water consumption and curb the polluting of this vital resource. She also suggests that “on an individual level, people [the world over] can start to dispose properly of medication, recycle, and reduce water usage to a minimum. More than that, Americans can unite to pressure our government to stop giving subsidies to farmers that use wasteful methods of irrigation, and fund research into more eco-friendly agricultural technology. They can also reward small-business farmers that use water more efficiently through methods like drip irrigation by giving them tax breaks, encouraging others to do the same.”

Nunez’ overall words of advice? “We must look ahead and see where our current practices [are leading us], because the earth will not be able to hold increasing populations with the current mismanagement of resources.” And Mr. Polstein predicts that “Earth's human population will
eventually level out, but the manner in which it does so will determine our future quality of life.” We all need to listen to the pleas of these high school students. What we do today affects their future and the future of all of life on earth.

The second and third place winners of the contest were also from Hastings High School, Emma Solomon and Dayna Wilmot, respectively. Ms. Nunez’ teacher of AP Environmental Science at LaGuardia is Derek Dubossi. He has been teaching Earth and Environmental Science for 7 years. The Hastings High School AP Environmental Science teacher is Melissa Shandroff, who has been teaching the subject and inspiring her students for 8 years. Both first place winners will be graduating high school in June. Mr. Polstein will be attending Bowdoin College in Maine in the fall and Ms. Nunez will be attending the University of Pennsylvania.

Any further questions can be addressed to Katherine Schwarz, k_schwarz54@yahoo.com. Katherine Co-chairs the Population and Consumption Committee for the Sierra Club, Atlantic Chapter.