

ASHG Continues Its Support of DNA Day

April 25th marked the fifth celebration of National DNA Day. Together with the National Human Genome Research Institute, the Genetics Society of America, and the National Society of Genetic Counselors, ASHG sponsored multiple activities around DNA Day.

Traditionally, we support members of the **Mentor Network** (http://www.genednet.org/pages/k12_mentor.shtml) in their visits to local K–12 classrooms to discuss genetics with teachers and students. This year, we have dozens of mentors providing talks all over the country. North Carolina and Georgia have both requested many speakers, so we hope to find opportunities for all our mentors in those states.

Last year, ASHG partnered with Applied Biosystems, an Applera Corporation business, to support an essay contest for middle and high school students. This year, they have supported the contest again, providing funding for awards for teachers and students, buttons and T-shirts with the new DNA Day logos, and five summer internships for winning students. This internship program is a new addition to the essay contest this year. Applied Biosystems will support up to five students with exemplary essays to do a paid (\$2,000.00) summer internship in a local laboratory. We are currently working with ASHG and GSA members to identify potential laboratories, projects, and mentors for these outstanding students, and we thank those members who have already agreed to serve in this capacity. The names of the student interns and the laboratories where they will complete projects are available online.

This year, we had essays from 41 different states and six different countries (only 27 states and three countries were represented last year). More than 320 classrooms participated in the essay contest. **Winning essays** on two different questions are currently online (http://www.genednet.org/pages/k12_dnaday07winners.shtml). The selection progress was a rigorous one, involving more than 120 different members of the collaborating societies to read and score almost 1,000 essays. Ten judges

each skimmed 50–100 essays to identify 400 semifinalist essays. Each of these semifinalists was scored by three more judges using a detailed rubric. The top 10 essays for each question were then screened and scored by nine additional individuals in order to award prizes. The winning essays combined the personal touch of the students, many of whom have experienced first-hand the role of genetics and genomics, with clearly conceived and worded essays that we are proud to honor this year.

Over the past 2 years, ASHG has collected almost 2,500 essays from students. They reveal that, while a considerable number of students and teachers understand the value, the power, and the limitations of genetics and genomics research, a significant number of essays reflect the “genohype” that is pervasive in society. The number of students that suggested the future of genetics is in eugenics and designer babies was suggestive that we, as scientists, clearly have a long way to go in educating the public about what *really* is the nature of our work. This “reality check” was offset by the number of essays that accurately and effectively described the students’ hope that genetic research ongoing in ASHG members’ laboratories today will provide them with new diagnostics, new treatments, and new cures for disease.

We are already beginning to prepare for DNA Day 2008 and are looking to expand our programs. Next year, we will have two essay contests: one for middle school students (grades 6–8) and one for high school students (grades 9–12). The middle school contest will be sponsored by the Hudson Alpha Institute for Biotechnology. We would like to thank Applied Biosystems and our judges and members of the ASHG Mentor Network who served ASHG in all our efforts surrounding National DNA Day 2007. If you would like to be more involved next year, please contact Kenna Shaw (kshaw@ashg.org).

KENNA SHAW
Director of Education