

Students Create Films for C-SPAN Competition

By Zack Hale
ROLL CALL STAFF

Move over, Michael Moore — you've got company.

Roughly 1,000 middle school and high school students recently submitted documentaries, the bulk of which dealt with health-related issues, to C-SPAN as part of the nonprofit cable news service's annual StudentCam competition.

One of the primary goals of StudentCam is to create a new generation of C-SPAN viewers. But, with that said, the cable-funded service doesn't take ratings into account, "so getting new viewers is more about civic engagement," C-SPAN spokeswoman Tamara Robinson said. To accomplish that aim, the competition requires students to create five- to eight-minute documentaries that focus on one of the nation's greatest strengths or the biggest challenges that it's facing. Each documentary must include C-SPAN footage in some way.

C-SPAN Vice President of Education

Joanne Wheeler said the competition also represents a way to roughly gauge what issues are weighing most heavily on young people's minds. Most of the documentaries submitted in 2004 focused on the Iraq War

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Tamara Robinson
C-SPAN spokeswoman

and illegal immigration, Wheeler said. This year the economy was second only to health care.

Wheeler also said C-SPAN receives many submissions that deal with homeless-

ness and poverty because a lot of contestants come from poor socioeconomic conditions — and that a significant number of students don't even have a teacher or adviser working with them. But overall, hundreds of teachers are using C-SPAN as an educational tool to pique their students' interest about government and politics, she said.

"The goal is to get students to realize that, 'My opinion matters,'" Wheeler said.

Earlier this month, middle school winner Matthew Shimura — whose documentary on childhood obesity earned him a trip to the White House — joined first lady Michelle Obama in the State Dining Room, where she fielded questions about her signature issue from a handful of C-SPAN documentarians and students from the District of Columbia and the Baltimore area.

Shimura's presence was especially fitting: He attends Punahou School in Honolulu, a K-12 school that counts President Barack Obama among its notable alumni. The president attended Punahou from 1971

to 1979 during his childhood in Hawaii.

Many students at the event asked about the role the federal government should play in the fight against childhood obesity. Shimura kicked the question-and-answer session off by asking, "How do you think the government can improve nutrition and physical activity in schools?"

The first lady responded that the federal government should avoid telling individual communities what to do. But she also advocated measures that would bring more transparency to misleading nutrition labels, provide schools with more funding for healthier lunches and encourage grocery stores to open new locations in underserved areas known as "food deserts." She also promised to use the bully pulpit of the White House to raise public awareness.

All of the 75 winning submissions can be viewed online at C-SPAN's Web site, and Wheeler said C-SPAN plans to air all of the documentaries over the course of a day later this month.