

## Current Issues in the News Provide Focus for May Student Discussions

Same sex marriage. Peace. Religious expression in public schools. NSA wiretapping and acquisition of private phone records. High school seniors from throughout the WAMC listening area selected these very current issues as the subjects of the final Student Town Meetings for the 2005-06 school year. All of the students took part in the Youth Media Project as a culminating activity in their Participation in Government (PIG) courses. **Alan Chartock** moderated each of the programs taped at the Linda Norris Auditorium during the month of May. The discussions are slated to air on *The Speakers' Corner* in June, July and August.

Members of social studies teacher **Kelly Connor's** class at **Rensselaer High School** discussed issues surrounding same sex marriage on Wednesday, May 10<sup>th</sup>. The program – entitled “**Is it time for state and national governments to recognize same-sex marriages?**” –included frequent WAMC commentator **Libby Post**, nationally syndicated columnist on lesbian and gay issues, and **Shaun Marie Levine**, Executive Director of the Conservative Party of New York State. The students approached both sides of the subject with great maturity. At the heart of the discussion was the definition and purpose of marriage. The panel was divided in their opinions regarding the issue – approximately two-thirds supported the concept, with the remaining one-third opposed, primarily on religious grounds. Libby Post made the discussion personal as she described her relationship with her partner, and their joint parenting of her partner's son. When compromise was suggested, Kevin, one of the students, responded that “separate but equal” isn't, and that homosexuals should be granted full equal rights.

Students from **Mohonasen High School** in Rotterdam, New York discussed the possible elimination of war on Wednesday, May 17<sup>th</sup>. The discussion question was: “**Should the United States lead an international initiative to eliminate war?**” The panel for this program included former United Nations Weapons Inspector **W. Scott Ritter**; **Ed Tick**, Director of Sanctuary: Mentoring the Soul, and author of a number of books on Post-traumatic Stress Disorder; UAlbany history professor **Larry Wittner**, author of three books on nuclear proliferation; and **Elliott Adams**, Veterans for Peace. .

Mohonasen social studies teacher **Nick Coupas** began working with WAMC Education Director Maryanne Malecki in February to prepare his students. The topic and focus for his spring semester classes was an outgrowth of Coupas' three-week visit to Japan in November 2005 as part of a Fulbright Educational Exchange. During his visit, he was struck by how the use of nuclear weapons in WWII has created long-lasting effects on Japanese society. The produced program will be included in Coupas' final report to his fellow educators in Japan.

**Lake George Central High School** decided to discuss “**Does religion and group prayer belong back in America's public schools?**” in their Student Town Meeting on Tuesday, May 23<sup>rd</sup>. **Tom Marcelle**, an attorney in private practice who is affiliated with the Alliance Defense Fund; **Tim Gordinier**, Director of the Institute for Humanist Studies, and an NY-CLU affiliate; and **Jay Worona**, Chief Counsel for the NYS School Boards Association, served as the community experts on the panel. Worona provided the students with an excellent handout summarizing the major Supreme Court cases dealing with this issue; the summary will be available electronically under “Instructional Resources” on the project's Web site, [www.wamcstudenttownmeetings.org](http://www.wamcstudenttownmeetings.org).

Approximately twenty students took an active role in the discussion, articulating a variety of perspectives on and permutations of religious expression in public schools. Of significant interest was the diversity of beliefs shared during the program, including atheism, Wicca,

agnosticism, Judaism and Christianity. The project was an interdisciplinary collaboration between social studies and English teachers **Carmen Ross and Nancy Dunn**.

Finally, **New Paltz Central High School** discussed the question: “**Is the federal government’s collection of electronic telecommunications information domestic security or Big Brother?**” on Wednesday, May 31<sup>st</sup>, with legal experts **Stephen Gottlieb** and **William C. Snyder**.

New Paltz social studies teacher **Debra Clinton** decided to involve her students in the project after attending a workshop on the Youth Media Project at the annual conference of the NYS Council for the Social Studies in Rye, New York. “This project has been a great way to keep the seniors involved and motivated during the final weeks of school,” Clinton remarked. “The project and issue – how governments need to balance the security of society with personal privacy – aligned perfectly with the course objectives. I am truly impressed with their research and preparation.” Based on the students’ interest, Clinton – as well as her colleagues in the other three schools – will involve her classes in the project during the next academic year.

High school educators interested in having *their* students take part in a WAMC Student Town Meeting during the 2006-07 school year should contact WAMC Education Director Maryanne Malecki at (518) 465-5233 X135 during the summer months to begin the planning process. The project is made possible through the financial support of the Educational Foundation of America; the Howard and Bush Foundation; Carl E. Touhey; and Jack & Connie Hume.