

Human Rights Essay Competition Inspires Young Activists

Greensborough College Student Wins \$1000 First Prize

By Lauren Scott

Greensborough College student Erin Stewart won this year's Castan Centre *Writing for Human Rights Essay Competition* with an insightful essay which contended that free speech is vital for social progression, increased compassion and the continuation of democracy.

The topic for this year's competition was "Freedom of Speech has gone too far", and there was a fantastic response from Year 11 and 12 students around the State, highlighting how interested today's youth are in both human rights and controversial public issues.

The competition tied in with Monash Law's annual Great Law Week Debate, in which the debaters addressed the same topic. Erin and the other competition winners were on hand to witness the debate, and to judge for themselves whether they had done as good a job as the celebrity debaters.

Paul Ronalds, World Vision Australia's Director of Policy and Programs and co-founder of wishlist.com.au, together with the respected QC, David Galbally, joined world debating champion Meg O'Sullivan to argue that freedom of speech has indeed gone too far. Human rights expert, Lex Lasry, QC, with Damien Carrick, presenter of ABC Radio National Law Report, and Kylie Lane, voted best speaker in the world at the 2005 University Debating Championships formed the negative team, to vehemently argue that freedom of speech is paramount in a democracy.

Following the debate, Erin was presented with her \$1000 prize by Castan Centre Deputy Director, Adam McBeth.



Castan Centre Deputy Director Adam McBeth presents Erin Stewart with her award.

Place-getters and recipients of special commendation awards were also presented with their prizes. Second prize and \$500 went to Xavier Hildebrand from Xavier College. Xavier persuasively argued that instead of harbouring personal prejudices, opinions should be debated and judged at face value, and that freedom of speech is one of many equally important rights which secure human dignity and integrity. Third prize and \$250 went to Michael Dorman from Narre Warren South College. Michael argued that by permitting extreme views from both sides of the political spectrum, a centrist platform is created which allows good ideas to be considered in good faith and concessions made, thus creating a progressive, yet stable society.

Certificates of commendation for their outstanding submissions were awarded to Rebecca Kerley of Mill Park Secondary College and Carla Bellomario of Lowther Hall. Lowther Hall received the schools prize for the quality and magnitude of its submissions. Other outstanding schools included Western Port Secondary College, Minaret College and Melbourne High School.

The judging panel was impressed with the entrants' ability to thoroughly explore both the specifics and generalities of the topic, illustrating their ability to demonstrate the importance of freedom of speech, while understanding the difficulties this human right can impose.

The Castan Centre, in conjunction with the Monash University Law School, would like to thank all of those students and schools who contributed to the great success of this year's *Writing for Human Rights Essay Competition*. We hope that both students and schools will continue their strong commitment to issues of such great social importance and that their activism and enthusiasm will inspire others to become involved in seeking justice and a fair go for all.

The winning essays can be found on the Castan Centre website by going to www.law.monash.edu.au/castancentre and clicking on "Human Rights Essay Competition"