

The Rho Kappa Spirit

Mary T. McCullagh

Many years ago, our school opened a chapter of Rho Kappa, the Social Studies Honor Society developed through the Florida Council for the Social Studies (FCSS). As department chair and member of FCSS, I was thrilled to be able to offer our students opportunities in the Honor Society for the Social Studies. We invited junior and senior students to join, and they eagerly began to investigate projects and activities to promote social studies, citizenship and civic engagement, along with the aim of simply having fun. I would like to share some of our experiences with members of National Council for the Social Studies now that NCSS has made Rho Kappa a national honor society open to schools in all states. Rho Kappa is the only national organization for high school juniors and seniors that recognizes excellence in the field of social studies.



photo by Mary T. McCullagh

Rho Kappa students celebrate Veterans' Day with Tuskegee Airmen Trainer Lt Col. Eldridge Williams.

Soon after we started our chapter, it was clear that our guest speakers, field trips, and celebrations drew the interest of sophomore and freshmen students who wanted to participate in the events. We decided that we would create a History Club to accompany the Rho Kappa Honor Society to encourage the involvement of students who were not yet eligible for the Honor Society status. We find that the participation of all grade levels allows us to cultivate the future leaders of Rho Kappa; in fact, the members of the current student executive board became involved as freshmen and sophomores. Our chapter is very active in school and in community ser-

vice. Our members are eager to work with classmates in a variety of projects and to host special events to honor our history. I asked three current student board members who have enjoyed their Rho Kappa participation to describe their experiences:

Christopher M.

As a member of Rho Kappa, I've participated in different projects and events celebrating American history and civic activism. I've enjoyed none more than participating in the Civic Voices International Democracy Memory Bank project. [In this program, students around the world have developed a collection of

oral histories from democratic activists; see www.civicvoices.org.] Through this project, I've interviewed or seen and transcribed interviews of a wide variety of people from all kinds of different backgrounds, from whose testimonies I have learned a great amount of history. A firsthand account provides a richer and more meaningful experience than reading from a textbook. The project has expanded my worldview and deepened the global awareness of students at Columbus High, which is an important lesson for many young people living in Miami. In addition, Rho Kappa has taught me not just about social studies and history, but about myself. Before becoming vice president, I never saw myself as a leader; now I see that I am much more capable than what I have given myself credit for.

Danny P.

Rho Kappa, to me, means awareness: awareness of history, of adversity, and above all, of unity. Over the years, our Rho Kappa Chapter has promoted the study of influential people in history and the celebration of events that should never be forgotten. We have looked for heroes and heroines in our own communities, and have been inspired as we interview them as part of the Civic Voices International Democracy Memory Bank Project (www.civicvoices.org), and share their words with interested students and educators worldwide. We commemorate famous events in history: September 11, with eyewitness testimony; Constitution Day; Veterans' Day, with World War II veterans; and Hispanic Heritage and African American History Months, to



Leo Casino, a Grammy nominated musician and film producer who led CCHS' musical African American History Month celebration, poses with a Rho Kappa alumnus.



Holocaust Survivor Fred Spiegel shares his testimony with Rho Kappa Students.

name a few. We regularly welcome guest speakers who share with us their participation in the community, and they encourage us to rise to the challenges that face our world. We utilize the in-house TV station to promote historical awareness with video and PowerPoint presentations; we also conduct information campaigns with flyers and banners. We participate in community service with other clubs, big and small, and share through actions the lessons we have learned from history. As a newly elected officer of Rho Kappa and the History Club, the baton has now been passed to my fellow officers and me. I hope we can continue the organization's reputation and commitment to advancing knowledge and community involvement to the greatest degree.

Christian M.

Through Rho Kappa Honor Society I

have learned many new things and have participated in many amazing activities the society has undertaken. Through The Civic Voices International Democracy Memory Bank Project (www.civicvoices.org), I have found a website containing amazing resources of civic engagement that inspire, more so than many other web resources. I also loved being able to hear the accounts of truly amazing people. For example, Alison Austin visited Rho Kappa members to share her commitment to working with children in Miami, and she shared how the U.S. civil rights movement influenced her life and her community involvement. I would not have participated in such inspiring activities had I not joined the Rho Kappa Honor Society.

Conclusion

Some of my most memorable Rho Kappa experiences have been witnessing stu-

dents as they interact with local community leaders. They gain incredible insights into what commitment to one's community looks like, and they learn how "ordinary" folks respond to challenges. They stand up, they speak out, and they lend a hand. The Rho Kappa events, activities, guest speakers, and field trips expand classrooms and course subjects and encourage students to take an active role in deepening their appreciation for social studies. Rho Kappa members dive in, contribute, explore, and construct their own understanding of the world and their roles in it!

I encourage you to contact me at mmcullagh@columbushs.com if you have questions or suggestions. Best wishes on a successful Rho Kappa school year! 🌐

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This article describes the typical activities of a Rho Kappa chapter. Rho Kappa National Social Studies Honor Society is a program of National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). This honor society is the only national organization for high school juniors and seniors that recognizes excellence in the field of social studies. Rho Kappa was originally established by the Florida Council for Social Studies in 2000 for the State of Florida. NCSS established Rho Kappa as a national program last year.

Any accredited public or private high school can apply for a local chapter, through which individual students will be inducted into the Rho Kappa National Social Studies Honor Society. For details, go to the Rho Kappa section of the NCSS website (www.socialstudies.org) or access it directly at <http://rhokappa.socialstudies.org/rhokappa/Home/>