

## REBECCA DERBY & RACHEL EMOND WINS THE GOLD MEDAL NHD 2012



**Rebecca Derby (left) and Rachel Emond (right),  
2012 NHD gold medalists**

1500 hours. That's how many hours Sevier County High School sophomore students Rebecca Derby and Rachel Emond conservatively estimate they put into their national winning History Day exhibit project entitled, "Ignition of a Revolution: The Fire That Changed America." They acknowledge that this estimate may sound high, but they point to the countless hours spent researching, acquiring photographs, documents, and quotes, developing their arguments and thesis, not to mention numerous trips to department and hardware stores in search of the perfect paint, moldings, and realistic effects to construct their board. "During the school year we dedicated every weekend," says Derby. "However, once summer started every day was National History Day!"

This was not their first attempt at National History Day (NHD). Emond first participated in 2009 as a seventh grade student, producing an exhibit focusing on John Mitchell, President Richard Nixon's embattled Attorney General. The following year, Emond teamed with Derby to develop a project focusing on the innovation of denim in the fashion industry. On entering high

*"During the school year we dedicated every weekend. However, once summer started every day was National History Day!"*

*— Rebecca Derby, Ignition of a Revolution: The Fire that Changed*

school, both Emond and Derby decided that they did not have the time to dedicate to another project, a decision made easier by the fact that their social studies teacher did not require students to create a history day project. But with a year of high school under their belts and looking for something to enhance their college applications, they decided to collaborate once again on a project.

The inspiration for their project derived from Margaret Peterson Haddix's *Uprising*, which they had read previously. Written for young teenagers, the historical novel traces the lives of three young women during troubled times in early 1900s New York City. Together, they are swept up in the struggle for women's rights and the chaos of labor strikes when working conditions worsen. All three girls are working on the afternoon of March 26, 1911, when a spark ignites some cloth at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory and the building is engulfed in flames, killing 126 (mostly young, Jewish immigrant women). Although they immensely enjoyed the novel, neither pursued any further research at the time. But upon hearing that NHD had chosen "Revolution, Reaction, and Reform in History" as the 2012 theme, Emond and Derby realized immediately that the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire would be a perfect topic to investigate. While they knew critical details of the fire and its victims, they did not yet understand the historical context. Other than briefly recalling class lectures on the industrial revolution and early twentieth century

reformers, they acknowledged that they knew little about the period in which the fire took place.

They began the research process with a trip to the local library, where they collected information from books and newspapers. They also found information online, using the internet as a guide to find digitized primary sources from numerous archives. "I can't imagine how many nights I was up until 2 and 3 in the morning searching for genuine primary sources," recalls Derby. They acknowledge that obtaining these crucial primary sources was difficult, but that proved to be a thoroughly rewarding experience.

Even as they continued to research, their thoughts turned to developing an informative exhibit presentation. Drawing from their past experiences at the district contest at the University of Tennessee, they knew that they had to do create something original, rather than the typical six foot cardboard projects that most students use to display their research. "We knew that to be competitive in the exhibit category required a visually stunning, but also highly informative presentation," says Derby. Their original design of their exhibit board featured a painted scene of the fire. But they soon scrapped this idea in favor of constructing a 3-D model of the Asch building, the scene of the tragic fire. Examining photos taken by photographers at the scene of the fire, they built a replica of the Asch Building to

*(continued on next page)*

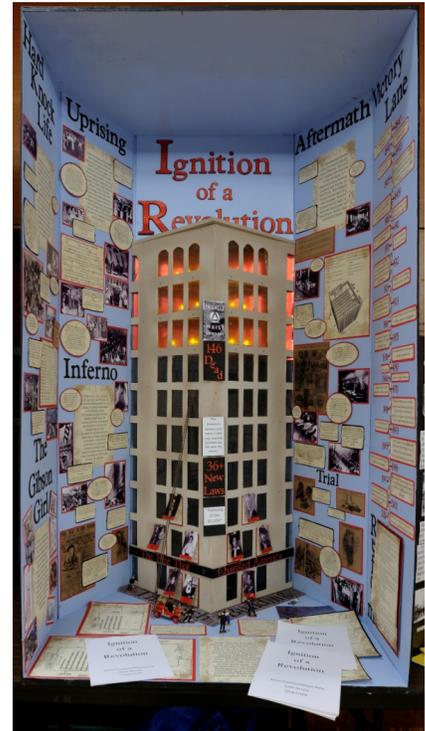
# REBECCA DERBY & RACHEL EMOND WINS THE GOLD MEDAL NHD 2012

scale, and then inserted firemen and victims to capture the grisly scene. Even the fire ladder is raised to the sixth floor, five floors short of the raging inferno, to emphasize that the New York City fire department did not have ladders that could extend far enough to reach the victims. They also painstakingly dyed each piece of paper containing quotes and their own words by hand so that everything appeared antique.

At the district contest, their exhibit received a lot of attention from fellow competitors, parents, teachers, parents, and even the judges who were not assigned to the project. Dr. Daniel Feller of the University of Tennessee regarded Emond and Derby's project as the best that he had ever seen at the district contest. The judges awarded their project first place, thereby making them eligible to advance to the state contest in Nashville. There, they earned second place and became eligible to represent Tennessee at the national contest at the University of Maryland. Although they regarded their silver medals as an honor, they were not content. "Unfortunately, we made the mistake of not improving our exhibit," says Derby. "It motivated us to dedicate all we had into our project." It was at this point that they sought out advice from teachers and the district coordinators. Overwhelmed with suggestions, they comprised a list of revisions. By the end of the following weekend everything was ripped off the board, which was scrubbed clean and disassembled. They then set out to redevelop their panels and strengthen their arguments and thesis statement. In the process, they also delved deeper into the Progressive era, the labor disputes within the garment industry, the lives of those who perished in the fire, and the significant reforms that were enacted in the aftermath of the fire.

With a few weeks before nationals, Emond left for Tennessee's Governor School. She

was selected from among thousands of Tennessee's most talented and gifted high school students to attend. It was at this critical juncture that Derby pressed forward and continued to make the changes that they had discussed. At nationals, Derby was overcome with a rush of emotions. She was nervous to be there, yet honored to represent her school and state. It proved humbling to look at the work of other students and to talk to students from across the nation that shared similar experiences while creating their own projects. "Shocking," says Derby as she describes the moment of hearing their names called by NHD's executive director, Dr. Cathy Gorn. "I needed assistance getting to the stage!" Emond and Derby describe their favorite part of their history day experience as seeing others learn from looking at their exhibit board. "Sharing this glimpse of history with others is our biggest reward," says Derby. *(Rebecca and Rachel's sponsoring teacher at Sevier County H.S. is Jeffrey Williams)*



Rebecca and Rachel's project at the district contest at the University of Tennessee.



Rebecca and Rachel's gold medal winning-project , with Thesis statement, at the National History Day contest at the University of Maryland.

—Courtesy of National History Day