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January 30, 2006

For Immediate Release:

CHS STUDENTS WRITE ESSAYS ON DIVERSITY

CHARLESTON – Three Charleston High School students shared winning insights on the merits of diversity in a high school essay contest sponsored by the African-American Heritage Celebration Committee at Eastern Illinois University.

Essays by Alexis Gossett, Gregory B. Frank and Kaitlin Mohon were selected as winners, earning savings bonds of \$100, \$75 and \$50, respectively, as well as T-shirts. The students are taught by Nell Wiseman.

Gossett is expected to read her first-place essay at the African-American Heritage Banquet on Friday, Feb. 3. In addition, all 98 student essays will be on display.

The banquet, which will be held in the Martin Luther King Jr. University Union's Grand Ballroom at EIU, is set to begin with a social hour at 5 p.m., followed by dinner at 6 p.m.

Tickets – \$15 for the general public, and \$8 for students – must be purchased by noon Wednesday, Feb. 1, in the Minority Affairs Office in Ninth Street Hall, at the corner of Ninth Street and Roosevelt Avenue, or by calling 581-6690.

The banquet's keynote speaker is Jeffrey Johnson, producer of "The Cousin Jeff Chronicles," a series of mini-documentaries on BET that tells the stories of black and Latino communities. Johnson is also an African Methodist Episcopal pastor and national director of the American Votes Young Voter Project.

Prior to the banquet, the Rosa Parks Memorial Voter Registration Drive is to be held from 5 to 6 p.m. in the Alumni Lounge in the University Union.

EIU's African-American Heritage Celebration, which includes events celebrating diversity throughout February, is being held in conjunction with Black History Month.

Following are the top three essays from Charleston High School:

First Place: What Diversity Means to Me, By Alexis Gossett

Can you define diversity? Diversity is a word that numerous people have a hard time putting into

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words. Many definitions state that diversity is merely "difference." However, diversity consists of countless more characteristics. Diversity requires us to not only designate that people are different, but to show them respect for being the way they are. Everyone is diverse from one another. Diversity can be as simple as a grandmother and a young child or as complex as an African American going to a university in which he or she makes up a minority. Several only consider race when they think of diversity, when really age, religion, sexual orientation, family background and personality make us all diverse from each other and the world we live in.

To me, the crucial part of diversity is respect. Unfortunately, people are oblivious to the way they treat others who are different. Why is it that we automatically judge others, and don't even give them a chance to be proud of their culture, family background or beliefs? Part of diversity is accepting people for who they are and being interested in learning more about the lives others lead. The opportunity to attend diverse universities is one of the greatest experiences students will have. Being surrounded with students from different countries opens people's eyes to a part of the world that many will never become familiar with. The public forgets to appreciate the unique people all around them and numerous people assume, "if someone is different, they are deficient." This statement could not be further than the truth. Imagine if everyone had the same beliefs, the same appearance or the same personality. Opinions, morals and individuality would no longer exist and the world would be one big mass of monotony. Difference teaches us to accommodate to the lifestyles of others, while interacting and learning from each other as well.

When asked what diversity means to me, I immediately thought of the negative aspects of being different. However, I realized that each and every person is diverse and everyone has something to offer to the rest of the world. Instead of saying that diversity means difference, to me it means uniqueness. Appreciate the diverseness of the world, because you never know what it could teach or expose you to!

Second Place: What Does Diversity Mean to Me? By Gregory B. Frank

I cannot comment on diversity beyond the point of my American experience. For as an American, I have experienced diversity in a dissimilar way, in comparison to other inhabitants of the world. In my generation, diversity has become ever more tolerated. Today's society is so broad in races, ethnic groups, and social classes, that such interaction with different groups is inevitable. Our society has, as a result, altered. Ergo, diversity means understanding, accepting, and looking past the differences in people, while accepting the change among our fellow humans.

We as a nation and world are accepting these differences better than generations of the past. In the future, our comprehension of diversity can generate further tranquility among the populace of the world. It has been the dream of mankind for generations to create peace. Countries such as the former Soviet Union and Germany have attempted to create perfect societies by eliminating such differences among the

people. It is easy to see, from our mistakes in the past, that our differences progress a nation and create further stability.

Breaking the barriers of prejudice is the beginning step in the process of international serenity. From the civil rights movement to the fall of the Berlin Wall, these barriers have been coming down for years. It is our goal, as we move closer and closer to global unity, that we never fail to remember our heritage. Yet, at the same time, we never hold our heritage against anyone.

Throughout our nation, we often hear the phrase, "Why don't they speak English? They are in America." This statement is a source of great conflict among people of our nation. The United States was founded on groups of diverse immigrants. I have my own heritage just as others have their own heritage; but I don't have the right to force my traditions and customs on others. Assimilation is more of a choice than a requirement. As a firm believer in democracy, I believe people have the right, as a human, to speak the language they wish, practice the religion of their choice, and embrace their own culture. These are the things that make us unique individuals, and comprise our world of diversity.

Third Place: What Diversity Means To Me, By Kaitlin Mohon

Walking down the hallway at school, students are bombarded with faces of different color, shape, and size. Girls, boys, gays, lesbians, atheists, Christians, in short, difference; everything that makes America what it is today: diversity.

No matter how you look at it, diversity is always present, and has a different meaning to everyone. To me, diversity is life. Diversity is acceptance. Diversity is forever. Diversity is everywhere you look, from San Diego, California, to Lerna, Illinois, and is an important part of everyone's life.

Living life as a white, middle class American girl, even I encounter diversity every day. At my school, my workplace, even in my home I encounter it. For instance, one of my uncles is African American. He is treated in our family just as anyone else is treated, and for good reason, because even though he may not look like the rest of us exactly, he is still our family. We are a part of him just as much as he is a part of us, and we all value and treasure him greatly. Also, as another example, my cousin has turned over to Catholicism, while her parents are strong Methodists. Although it came as a challenge to the family, we learned to accept it, although it was different.

Throughout my life, I have learned that diversity is acceptance, love, and life. Difference does not always mean disgrace, and sometimes it adds a little spice to my life. People in America, as well as many of the other countries around the world, deal with diversity differently, but to me, diversity is normalcy. Diversity is my life.