



NATIONAL HISTORY DAY® EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CATHY GORN ANNOUNCES RETIREMENT

***LONGTIME HEAD OF COUNTRY'S LEADING YOUTH HISTORY PROGRAM TO
OVERSEE TRANSITION IN 2026***

***NHD 2026 National Contest in College Park, MD, June 14 - 18; "Revolution,
Reaction, Reform in History" on Eve of Country's 250th Anniversary***

College Park, MD - January 14, 2026 - Cathy Gorn, Ph.D., the longtime head of National History Day® (NHD), the country's leading history organization dedicated to improving the teaching and learning of history for middle and high school students, announced today that she will step down in January 2027.

During Gorn's tenure, National History Day grew from an annual national student competition to a year-round international education program for students and teachers. NHD began as a local history competition for students in Ohio in 1974 and was still in its infancy as a national endeavor when Gorn joined the organization in 1982. In 1995, Gorn assumed the role of Executive Director, leading the organization from financial uncertainty to stability and growth. Her efforts fundamentally shaped the evolution of NHD from a series of contests to a full-fledged, highly acclaimed international academic program.

Today, NHD includes students from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, three U.S. territories, and international schools in 10 countries. More than 500,000 students participated in 2025 through the local, regional, and national contests.

"It is, of course, very difficult to leave an organization that has been such an important part of my life," Cathy Gorn said. "I have been extremely fortunate to work with talented staff, amazing teachers, and generations of students to try to better understand who we are as a country and people. This year, the 250th anniversary of our nation, is the perfect time to imagine the next chapter for our country and for NHD."

Through the introduction of innovative, hands-on educational programs for students and teachers, Gorn oversaw the development of teacher and student learning programs, professional development and classroom resources for middle and high school teachers, and created the highly acclaimed Normandy Sacrifice For Freedom® and Silent Heroes® programs. She also established partnerships with a wide range of local and national organizations to further the mandate of helping young people think about the past and its impact on the present, including the National Archives, the Library of Congress, the White House Historical Association, the

Smithsonian Institution, and others. These efforts garnered National History Day numerous awards, including the 2011 National Humanities Medal, presented by President Obama.

“Cathy Gorn taught all of us that critical thinking and fact-based historical research are foundational to thoughtful and engaged citizenship,” said Celie Niehaus, President of the Board of National History Day. “For generations of students, NHD is about the discovery of real people trying to understand who they are as they engage with a world not dissimilar from our own. Dr. Gorn has been an inspiration for them, along with the thousands of teachers and civic leaders who believe that a collective engagement with the past is critically important to our country’s future.”

Niehaus added, “We’re excited about NHD’s next chapter and are currently consulting with executive talent experts to launch a search for NHD’s next director. We expect the search to commence at some point soon.”

The filmmaker Ken Burns, a longtime supporter of NHD, said, “I’ve attended many National History Day contests. Cathy’s guidance inspired students to dig deeper into our past while also encouraging them to embark on a journey of discovery that would last for years to come. History, she taught them and us, isn’t just about what happened. It’s about understanding how people navigate the world, the choices they make, and the challenges they face. We are all in her debt for the decades of attention she’s devoted to our country’s young people.”

When Gorn took over as Executive Director in 1995, National History Day had a budget of \$300,000 and a staff of two. Today, the national organization has a budget exceeding \$5 million, an endowment of \$5 million, and a staff of 12.

“National History Day is financially and institutionally strong,” Gorn said, “but our nation is unfortunately weak when it comes to civic engagement and an appreciation and understanding of the past. As we saw with recent cuts to the National Endowment for the Humanities and other programs involving history, it is ever more important for NHD to speak about the importance of history education, to advocate on behalf of teachers in the classroom, and to support students and all learners who believe an understanding of our past is a critical part of our health as a country and a democracy.”

On January 13, Gorn informed NHD leaders and affiliate organizers of her decision to step down. This summer, Gorn will preside over her 44th national contest from June 14th to 18th in College Park, MD, themed *Revolution, Reaction, Reform in History* to align with the 250th anniversary of the country this July 4th.

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ABOUT NATIONAL HISTORY DAY® (NHD)

NHD is a non-profit organization based in College Park, Maryland, that seeks to improve the teaching and learning of history. Established in 1974, NHD currently engages more than half a million students each year in conducting original research on historical topics of interest and supports teachers through professional development opportunities. Students present their

research as a documentary, exhibit, paper, performance, or website. Projects compete first at the local and affiliate levels, where the top entries are invited to the annual National Contest at the University of Maryland at College Park. NHD is sponsored in part by the Joyful Noise Charitable Foundation, The Better Angels Society, Bezos Family Foundation, Library of Congress, Dr. Scholl Foundation, Behring Global Educational Foundation, 400 Years of African American History Commission, and the National Park Service. For more information, visit nhd.org.

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