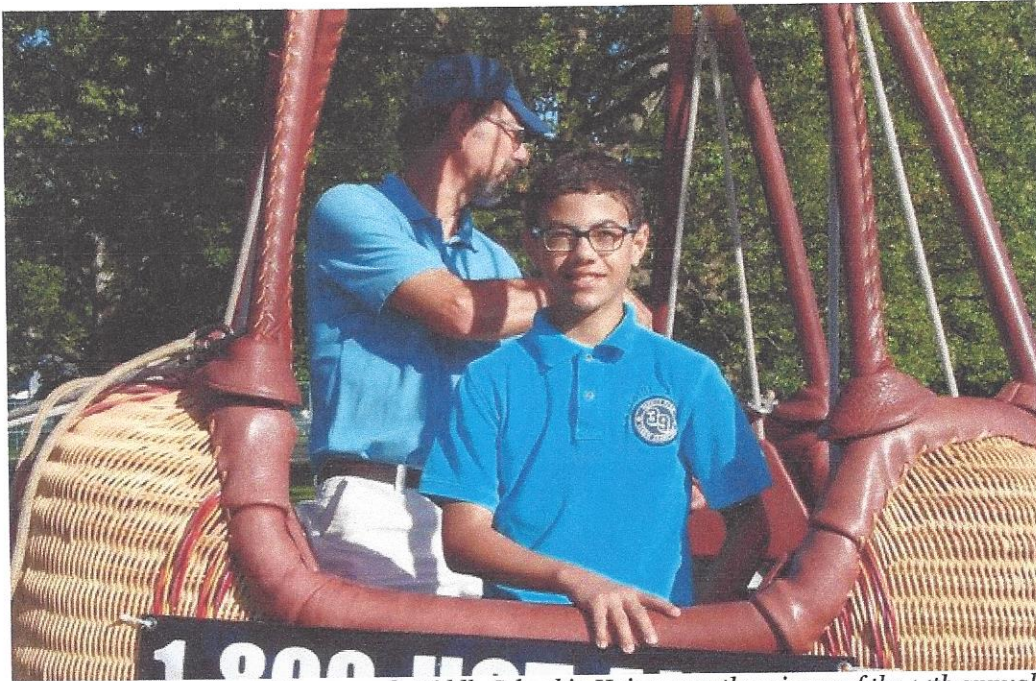


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Family's freedom inspires winner of essay about American Flag



Guy Francis, a seventh grade student at Kawameeh Middle School in Union, was the winner of the 14th annual PNC Bank American Patriot Essay Contest. Among his prizes was a tethered hot air balloon ride on June 20, 2017, at his school. (courtesy photo)

BY **COMMUNITY BULLETIN**

UNION TWP. - To 13-year-old Guy Francis, the American Flag means freedom, particularly the freedom his ancestors attained going back several generations as his maternal great grandfather traveled 4,000 miles to flee the Nazis during World War II and his paternal great, great, great grandfather escaped from slavery in North Carolina.

The seventh grader from Kawameeh Middle School in Union has been named the Grand Prize winner of the 14th annual PNC Bank "American Patriot Essay Contest," a statewide competition sponsored by the QuickChek New Jersey Festival of Ballooning in Association with PNC Bank in which school children in grades 2 through 12 throughout New Jersey wrote about "What the American Flag Means to Me."

As part of his Grand Prize, the Festival and PNC Bank brought a 75-foot-tall hot air balloon to his school Tuesday, where he took a tethered ride in front of his family, hundreds of classmates, township and county officials and dignitaries.

His moving essay was selected the best among the thousands of essays received by a panel of judges comprised of PNC Bank and Balloon Festival staff and educators. The contest was held as part of PNC's community outreach efforts through its association with the QuickChek New Jersey Festival of Ballooning.

Guy also receives a free ride in one of the 100 hot air balloons at the 35th annual festival, July 28-30 in Readington, along with VIP tickets for his family. Each of his 29 classmates, his teacher, and his school principal receive free tickets to the annual festival, the largest summertime hot air balloon and music festival in North America.

"It was extremely heartfelt to see the very personal meaning the flag and his family have to him," said Festival Executive Producer Howard Freeman. "To understand what his ancestors went through to achieve their freedom, going back several generations, is very impressive. His essay best captured the spirit of both the contest and American flag. QuickChek, PNC and the festival are proud to present him with this award."

For the first time in the contest's history, the first and second place finishers are from the same school as Judd Espejo, also a seventh grader, was runner-up.

Judd wrote how his mother would not have been able to receive treatment to completely heal from stage 2 breast cancer had they been living in the home country in the Philippines and not here in the United States.

Both Guy and Judd are students in the school's gifted and talented program taught by Larry Petras.

Samantha Lagrosa, a sixth grade student at George G. White Middle School in Hillsdale, was third. Espejo and Lagrosa also receive complimentary admission into the festival, as do all teachers who submitted 15 or more essays on behalf of their students.

For additional information on the contest and the QuickChek New Jersey Festival of Ballooning in Association with PNC Bank visit www.balloonfestival.com.