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## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **John R. Lewis H.S. Students Awarded Three Scholarships for Essays on Democracy**

*Fairfax Democrats Black Caucus Honors Outstanding Submissions*

FAIRFAX COUNTY – Three students from John R. Lewis High School received scholarship awards from the Fairfax County Democratic Committee’s (FCDC) Black Caucus for outstanding essays on the meaning of democracy.

The first-place winner was Marc Gratil, a senior at the school. Gratil said what motivated him to participate in the contest was his desire to answer the question about democracy’s meaning. “This question is something everyone should think about,” emphasized Gratil. He said working on his response helped put into perspective the importance of youth to maintaining democracy.

M. Karim El-Gaili won the second-place prize, and Mikias Abebe received the third-place award. The three scholarship awards were \$1500 for first, \$1000 for second, and \$500 for third place.

Contest participants from the senior class were requested to write essays of up to 1,000 words on “The Meaning of Democracy to Me.” The submissions were reviewed by a committee comprised of members of the Fairfax County Democratic Committee’s Black Caucus and teachers from the John R. Lewis High School Leadership Program.

The FCDC Black Caucus created the contest to call attention to the state of modern democracy in the United States and around the world. Kelly Hebron, Chair of the FCDC Black Caucus said: “We wanted to give students an opportunity to use their voices, so we used this essay topic as a platform for them to be heard.” Russell Brooks, Essay Committee Chair, seconded this sentiment and noted that “no school was better positioned to represent the Caucus’ goals than a school named after the civil rights hero.”

John Lewis was one of the Freedom Riders who rode buses into the Deep South to push for the integration of interstate travel. As Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Lewis delivered a powerful speech at the 1963 March on Washington. He also marched in Selma, Alabama and was brutally beaten attempting to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in a march to Montgomery, Alabama in one of the signature events that led to the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Elected to the House of Representatives in 1986, Lewis served 17 terms. He died on July 17, 2020.

Hebron and Brooks congratulated the three winners at an awards ceremony attended by students, teachers, and staff in the school library on Tuesday, February 22, a day after John Lewis’ birthday. The awards ceremony was kicked off by the school band and featured a riveting poem devoted to Rep. Lewis by spoken word artist Joseph Green. Hebron said the Caucus hopes to make the essay contest an annual event.

## **About FCDC and the FCDC Black Caucus**

FCDC is the largest local Democratic Party organization in the Commonwealth of Virginia, representing the Democrats from strongly Democratic Fairfax County, Virginia's most populous jurisdiction.

The FCDC Black Caucus' mission is to promote the political, economic, and social advancement of Blacks in Fairfax County by encouraging Black participation in the political process, increasing the number of Black FCDC members, and expanding the number of Blacks seeking and holding elected and appointed positions within the county through education and training. To learn more, visit [fairfaxblackcaucus.org](https://fairfaxblackcaucus.org).

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