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For Immediate Release

Maysville native immerses herself in Navajo culture for civic education program

FRANKFORT, Ky., Dec. 23, 2009 – Maysville native Deborah Williamson was among 30 educators from 14 states who recently spent three days in Chinle, Ariz., immersing themselves in Navajo history, culture and government for the *We the People ... The Citizen and the Constitution* civic education program. Williamson was selected to participate in The Navajo Nation Experience because of her role as state coordinator for the program.

Williamson is the executive officer of the Department of Court Services at the Administrative Office of the Courts, the operational arm of the Kentucky court system. The Kentucky Court of Justice and the Center for Civic Education in California co-sponsor the *We the People* program in Kentucky. Also, Williamson will be teaching a course titled Native Americans and the Criminal Justice System at the University of Kentucky in the spring.

The Navajo Nation Experience, which took place Sept. 26-28, included lectures by Navajo leaders, historians and scholars, as well as visits to historic and cultural sites, including the Canyon de Chelly and Monument Valley.

“The Navajo Nation Experience gives teachers greater content knowledge about indigenous tribes and nations, a subject often not covered adequately in social studies class,” said Robert S. Leming, director of *We the People ... The Citizen and the Constitution* for the Center for Civic Education. “The seminar covers an important aspect of American history and challenges these educators to think about basic constitutional values in a new context. For example, citizenship has a different meaning to the Navajo and indigenous tribes than it does to the vast majority of Americans.”

Williamson said the seminar also helped her to learn more about how the Navajo judiciary compares to state judiciaries.

Implemented nationally in upper elementary, middle and high schools, *We the People ... The Citizen and the Constitution* teaches students the fundamental principles and history of the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights. More than 30 million students and 81,000 teachers have participated in the program since its inception in 1987. The program is

funded by the U.S. Department of Education under the Education for Democracy Act approved by Congress and is directed by the Center for Civic Education. The Navajo Nation Experience began in 2008 to provide classroom teachers a counterpoint to the *We the People* book and materials.

“Teachers gain a deeper understanding of the American colonies, expansion of rights, the federal system and the idea of citizenship through the perspective of the American Indian,” Leming said. “This experience in turn enriches their students’ understanding of our country’s fundamental constitutional principles.”

These issues are examined in Navajo Citizenship and Constitutional Law, a lecture that professor David Wilkins of the University of Minnesota gives as part of The Navajo Nation Experience. Wilkins teaches and writes in the areas of comparative politics, American political theory, federal Indian policy, tribal government, and the history of colonialism and native peoples.

These Navajo leaders, American Indian historians and constitutional scholars also present information during The Navajo Nation Experience:

- Timothy Begaye, chair and faculty administrator, Center for Dine Teacher Education, Dine College
- Jennifer Denetdale, history professor, Northern Arizona University
- Laverne Garnenez, law clerk, Navajo Nation Supreme Court
- Peter Iverson, history professor, Arizona State University
- Robert Leming, director, *We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution*

The content sessions are enhanced by the trips to Canyon de Chelly and Monument Valley, where teachers study Navajo architecture, artifacts and rock imagery and witness the beauty and grand scale of the landscape.

“The excursions provide an important cultural and spiritual reference to Navajo history that cannot be gleaned from a book,” Leming said.

The Center for Civic Education

The Center for Civic Education is an educational, nonpartisan nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering the development of informed, responsible participation in civic life by citizens committed to the values and principles fundamental to American constitutional democracy. The Center has offices in Washington and in Calabasas, Calif. Visit the Center Web site at www.civiced.org.

Administrative Office of the Courts

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