

Dear SCSPA Journalist of the Year Committee,

In the academic setting, Sophie Winnick isn't the highest average, but she stands out as a communicator. Sophie has been a student in my AP U.S. Government and Politics class for the past six months, and during this short period of time I have been impressed by her intellect, which has been strengthened by her experience in high school journalism. Instead of focusing on a grade, she searches for conclusions improving the learning process for not only for her but for her classmates. Her approach to academics includes empathy, the need to learn the truth without judgment, and attempting to understand why things occur.

As a teacher of U.S. Government and Politics, I have watched as the media literacy of our youth has slowly eroded as social media becomes the main avenue for citizens to receive news. Many students lack the skill, desire, or commitment to learn the details of our current political news. Repeatedly Sophie has demonstrated she is not the typical high school senior. In class, we study the media and take a few days to explore the idea of media bias. In a typical South Carolina classroom, most students begin the study of the unit with a belief in a liberal media bias. During her class, her classmates were sharing their beliefs without any really evidence. As usual, Sophie demonstrated restraint waiting until she had some knowledge before making a decision on an issue. As we were exploring the ideologies of journalists and media owners and analyzing media clips, Sophie was the first student to consider bias not from the view point of ideology, but the drive for ratings. Sophie's prior experience in high school journalism helped her understand the nuances of the story titles, the placement of the story, the caliber of the experts interviewed. She could identify leading questions and think critically for all the news sources pointing out the difference between print and broadcast news. On this particular day, the teacher learned from the student.

Professional journalists are expected to listen to both sides and ask questions to highlight the facts. In light of this past year, students are having trouble finding examples of stories not influenced by the entertainment value or party polarization of our politics. Students are listening to pundits and not understanding the agenda of those pundits. Since October we have held countless whole group discussions on topics ranging from political debates to candidates transitioning as elected officials, and students have struggled and continue to struggle with separating the emotions of the campaign from the actual business of governing. For instance, our discussion for Inauguration Day covered if it was appropriate for members of Congress to boycott the ceremony. Students were split based on ideology, but Sophie was one of the few students who did more than react to the question. She listened to the views of her peers from both parties, and then she was able to connect their emotion to why the small group of Congressman was boycotting. Taking her analysis one extra step, she discussed the importance of the ceremony itself and why elected officials may need to consider the symbolism, tradition, and the office of the president over the person. Using empathy in this particular emotionally charged setting was evidence of her maturity, but the ability to not only listen to both sides, but attempt to understand the why.

Sophie reminds me of two journalists I watch weekly on the PBS Newshour: Mark Shields and David Brooks. Each man represents a different party, but they are able to carry on a civil

discourse and hold the politicians of their respective parties accountable. Sophie is able to achieve this in the classroom with her peers. She acknowledges the valid points of each side before challenging the flaws of an argument showing no fear as she tackles some complicated political issues. Sophie's ability to question without attacking the source is her true talent, earning the respect of her peers and allowing her to exercise her right as the final check on authority. Communication is vital to our society and Sophie has demonstrated in my class the skills needed to be an effective communicator both oral and written. She listens, thinks, and then responds taking the same care with an oral response as a written response.

Sophie Winnick deserves to be the scholastic journalist of the year, and I hope she continues to use her talents in journalism. She is the type of student who gives me hope for the future of this country.

Misty LeClerc

AP US Government and Politics teacher