

For Which We Stand

How a Russellville teacher used her AHA Riley Scholarship to help students learn the rights and responsibilities of citizenship

Story and photos by Phillip Jordan

Russellville Middle School serves a town of around ten thousand within Franklin County, in the rolling hillsides of northwest Alabama. The school's population reflects the growing local community.

Over the past few decades, Hispanic immigrants from Mexico and countries in Central America have arrived here, drawn by opportunities in the region's agricultural fields and poultry production. These new residents have helped to revitalize Russellville's economy and downtown community. Today, roughly two-thirds of the middle school's students come from immigrant families.

That mix of students has helped the school build a vibrant and close-knit student body, but it can also present a challenge for effectively teaching American history, civics, and democracy.

For Amanda Ridge, a sixth grade social studies teacher at Russellville Middle, that challenge sparked an idea — one that would help all of her students better connect with American civics, and help Ridge better address new state standards for the teaching of history.

First, she envisioned her students studying *For Which We Stand*, a civics book for young learners that explains how U.S. democracy and government works — and how young people can engage with it in their own communities. Then, her students would work together to create their own series of books on the rights and responsibilities they each have. To their school, their town, and their country.

Ridge knew she could build this as a replicable project for years to come. She just needed help paying for the books and materials needed to get it started.

Enter the Alabama Humanities Alliance and AHA's Jenice Riley Memorial Scholarship for K-8 teachers.

A classroom democracy lab

Ridge applied for a 2025 Riley Scholarship. The award

provides up to \$2,000 in support of professional development opportunities or creative classroom projects that help students better learn history and civics. Ridge was one of four teachers selected as 2025 Riley Scholars statewide.

She quickly got to work. Over the course of the 2025-2026 school year, the walls of Ridge's classroom filled with copies of the Constitution, Bill of Rights, presidential photos, maps, and posters of defining moments in American history. Nearly an entire wall was overtaken by sticky notes from students brainstorming ideas for their books.



Amanda Ridge (holding check) with her students after receiving a 2025 Riley Scholarship from Alabama Humanities.

Her students read, discussed, and debated the rights and responsibilities of good citizenship. They worked collaboratively, with each student assigned a role as researchers, writers, editors, designers, illustrators, and fact-checkers. They created sections on symbols and imagery of their school, town, and country. And they explored what it means to be engaged and informed contributors in each of these communities.

These classroom discussions became more important, and timely, than Ridge ever imagined. A heightened federal focus on immigration enforcement brought fear and confusion to many in Russellville's population in 2025 and 2026. Ridge's classroom civics project gave students a common language and common ground from which to better understand their country, their community, and each other. Especially during a time when civics-related phrases like *citizen* and *citizenship* became loaded with unexpected tension.

"It's been tough," says Ridge. "I've been a counselor as much as a teacher recently. There have been a lot of deep conversations, a lot of tears, and a lot of love through this year. We've had families directly impacted by all this, and we have other students trying to understand what's happening to their friends."

"With this project, we've learned what it means to disagree with respect when people interpret rights and responsibilities differently. We've talked about what we owe to our country and also what we owe to each other in times like these."

Golden Patriots

One of the highlights of the project came when a student wrote a section comparing and contrasting the school's core values (respect, integrity, kindness, and more) with the country's Bill of Rights.



One of Ridge's students at work on their class's book, *What is a Golden Patriot?*

"That student's connection really made an impact on our books," Ridge recalls. "He was showing, yes, you have the rights to freedom of speech and the right to assembly, but you also have the responsibility to use them respectfully. If you're going to be a good citizen, a good neighbor, you can't just go out in your school or community and say whatever you want. You've got to also have respect and kindness for others around you."

The students' books came to be titled, *What Is A Golden Patriot?* The name plays off the school's Golden Tigers nickname and the project's civic focus. Today, each student has copies of their own book to share with family and friends. Additional copies are also available in every school and public library in town. Ridge's students even created a "younger reader" version for elementary school students.

"That was really exciting to know we're making this book so that little kids can read it, too," says a student named Alena. "Because this is important for everyone to read. The words in our core values and rights really mean something. They hold up our foundation together."

Congrats to our 2026 Riley Scholars

Virginia Conerly

Project: "Revolutionary Roll Call of 1776"
School: Hampton Cove Elementary
(Owens Cross Roads)

Abby Crews

Project: "Reading Our Way Through Revolutions,
Reactions, Reforms in History"
School: Mulkey Elementary School
(Geneva)

2027 Riley Scholarships

Alabama's K-8 educators can now apply
for a 2027 Riley Scholarship.

Full details at
[alabamahumanities.org/
jenice-riley-memorial-
scholarship](http://alabamahumanities.org/jenice-riley-memorial-scholarship).

