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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Mountlake Terrace student wins WCOG's high school essay contest**

SEATTLE – Merik Robles of Archbishop Murphy High School in Everett is the winner of the 2021 Scott Johnson High School Essay Contest, the Washington Coalition for Open Government announced Friday.

Robles' essay, "Government Records – Advancing the Cause of Justice," examined the need for government transparency in light of the death of Manuel Ellis while in police custody. Three Tacoma police officers were charged in his death and await trial.

"The public has the right to know how police use their power and to examine the appropriateness of policing tactics and use of force," Robles wrote. "Mr. Ellis' death illustrates the importance of government transparency."

WCOG has been active on matters of police accountability, in particular on policies for officer body cams. We were among the requesters who sought public records on the Ellis case.

Fred Obee of the Washington Newspaper Publishers Association, the WCOG board member who chaired the student essay contest, praised all of the entries. The judges selected Robles' essay with a unanimous vote.

WCOG Executive Director Juli Bunting thanked the entrants and the judges.

"The essays were some of the best we've seen in the years we have conducted this contest," she said. "Congratulations to Merik and all the entrants on a job well done. We continue to work to educate young people about the importance of transparency and open government, and these essays are a great tool in that mission."

The call for entries this year said, "Identify an event or issue where open government meetings or records helped advance the cause of justice. Explain how this government transparency made a difference in the public's understanding and how people were held accountable for their actions."

Research done recently for WCOG by communications students at Western Washington University showed social justice ranked highest among the issues young people in the state pay attention to and would support through donations.

"Social justice and government transparency go hand in hand," Bunting said. "WCOG is the leading advocate for access to public records in Washington."

WCOG administers the annual contest, which is sponsored by Seattle law firm Stokes Lawrence and comes with a \$1,000 cash prize for the winner.

The late Scott Johnson was a Stokes Lawrence attorney and a member of the WCOG board. He died suddenly in October of 2012, just before he would have been sworn in as a King County Superior Court Judge.

The Washington Coalition for Open Government is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization founded in 2002. We are an independent, broad-based advocate for public records, open meetings and informed citizens.

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