



Posted on Wed, May. 06, 2009

Dade teens head to world finals for problem-solving competition

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They're the best in the state. Now they're ready to take on the world.

Their game: Odyssey of the Mind, a problem-solving competition that involves tens of thousands of kids from across the globe.

Seven teenagers from Coral Reef Senior High make up the elite team headed to Iowa State University at the end of May to compete in Odyssey's world finals. They've spent the last nine months preparing: crafting a skit, building a set and honing their on-the-spot thinking skills.

"Now is our time to shine," said Coral Reef junior Adriana Bracho.

Odyssey consists of two parts:

First, students select one of five "long-term problems." Some problems ask the students to build a balsa-wood structure that can hold hundreds of pounds. Others ask for a vehicle that can maneuver itself.

The students must then create an 8-minute skit around the problem. They design sets, build props and sew costumes -- all on a tight budget set by the organizers.

For the second part, the students must give on-the-spot responses to a question or statement they've never heard. Sometimes, the students must respond by building some sort of structure or contraption.

Judges score each "spontaneous" answer based on creativity. Students get extra points for teamwork.

"Odyssey of the Mind showcases creativity from around the world," national spokeswoman Jennifer Veale said. "It really lets kids hone their problem-solving skills."

The competition has been around for more than three decades. Students can participate at the elementary, middle and high school levels. There's also a division for college students, too.

"This builds self confidence," said regional director Juan Salinas. "And the kids have fun."

South Florida currently boasts 27 teams.

The Coral Reef teens are no strangers to international competition. Three were on a team that went to the world finals last year.

They came in 19th place.

This year, the team had to build a small, self-propelled vehicle. During the skit, the vehicle must "travel" to four different locations.

Team member Tanner Hast, 17, took the lead on the vehicle -- a robot built from Legos, a clay pot, four wheels, half of a Chinese lantern, gears, motors and duct tape.

Alex Zust, 16, helped and was the guru when it came to woodwork.

The accompanying skit is a Star Wars parody. The teens created the set by painting old refrigerator boxes.

They practice weekly in coach Roxana Bracho's living room, a space that has been cleared of furniture for the sake of Odyssey of the Mind. While there are no couches, there is no shortage of cardboard, paint or other art supplies.

"This is what my living room looks like from October to May," Bracho said during a Sunday afternoon rehearsal.

Moments later, her 16-year-old daughter Adriana skipped into the room wearing a red sequined dress and a matching red hat.

"All right, guys, let's run through the skit," she said, prompting her teammates to spring to action.

They launched into their short play. Upon finishing, erupted into laughter.

Each teen brings a different skill set to the team. Before this year, many didn't even know one another. Some had never even heard of Odyssey of the Mind.

'At first, I was like, 'Where's my weekend going?' " said Ryan Barnes, a junior, who joined the team with two of his best friends.

But the teenagers quickly became a family, sophomore Catherine Zaw said. As in any family, there are occasional disputes. But, "we've stuck together through thick and thin," Catherine said.

They've celebrated together, too, first after winning the regional competition in February, and then after clinching the state title in early April.

"It was awesome," said Anthony Acosta-Kane, 16, of the team's victory. "We weren't expecting it."

In anticipation of the world finals, the team has been practicing daily. They sometimes rehearse late into the night.

"It's a serious commitment, especially when you are competing at the world finals," said Bracho, the coach. "You have to give it everything you have because now, you're competing against the best of the best."

The students must raise about \$1,000 each to travel to the world finals in Iowa. They're working diligently to find the funds.

In addition to Odyssey, the Coral Reef teens manage an assortment of Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes, and still find time for varsity sports.

How do they do it all?

"We don't sleep," Adriana said.

The students say the hard work is well worth it.

"We really love this," Catherine said.

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