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Two Miami-Dade teams seek Odyssey of the Mind World title

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Allison Diaz / For the Miami Herald

Emily Roy (left) and Lauren DeLeon, both age 14 and eighth-graders at David Lawrence Jr. K-8 Center, work on an astronaut costume made with marshmallows for the Odyssey of the Mind World Finals competition, which they are competing in this weekend. The team's problem is titled "Full Circle," and requires them to create and present a humorous performance where something changes form or appearance at least three times and includes a song and dance.

For 14 students from Miami-Dade, the ability to think outside of the box has earned them the right to call themselves champions.

This weekend, two Miami-Dade schools will represent Florida in the Odyssey of the Mind World Championships at the University of Maryland.

Along with about 900 other teams from across the United States and around the world, seven fourth- and fifth-graders from Palmetto Elementary in Pinecrest and seven middle school students from the David Lawrence K-8 Center in North Miami will present their solutions to the creative-thinking exercises they've been working on since the fall.

"Right before the performance we're nervous," said Briana Hawryluk, 14, one of five eighth-graders on the David Lawrence team. "But once we're doing it, that's our element."

Odyssey of the Mind is an international educational program that emphasizes creative problem-solving. Kids from kindergarten through college participate around the world.

Each year, the Odyssey of the Mind organization releases five long-term problems. Teams may choose one to work on and then present at the regional, state and world levels. During competition, teams are also given a problem to solve on the spot.

Some of the problems are more technical, like building and operating a vehicle or a robot, while others are artistic and performance based, like writing an additional chapter to Moby Dick, or bringing a painting to life. Art, literature and architecture are emphasized.

"It's not a standard structure," said Carol Bregman, one of the Odyssey of the Mind coaches at David Lawrence, and a language arts teacher at the school. "They're critically thinking within a parameter, which is what the country needs, learning how to be creative within a framework."

Bregman has been coaching Odyssey of the Mind at David Lawrence for five years and is known as the "OM Guru." This year the school had three teams working in the middle school age division, but only the "Full Circle" team made it to the World Championships.

The Full Circle problem required students to create and present a humorous performance where something changes form or appearance at least three times. The performance had to include a silly character, a serious character, a song, a dance and a surprise ending.

The biggest requirement of Odyssey of the Mind though, is that the students write, plan, build and present their solutions all on their own, with very little input or guidance from their coaches and parents.

The David Lawrence team wrote their script themselves, entirely in rhyme. They also built their own sets and created costumes that unfold into other costumes made out of unusual materials, like a helmet that serves for both a knight and an astronaut, made out of silver Capri Sun juice pouches.

“We based the story on Odyssey of the Mind and how it was created,” Briana said. “With a big twist, with pirates and dragons!”

Odyssey of the Mind was first created by Dr. Sam Micklus, at Rowan University in New Jersey. Micklus challenged his industrial design students to think creatively, inventing vehicles without wheels and mechanical pie throwers. His students and their unique projects received media attention, and soon thereafter Micklus was writing problems for other people to solve.

Now in its 32nd year, the Odyssey of the Mind World Championships has thousands of participants from as far away as Siberia, Singapore and West Africa. For the team from Palmetto Elementary, the World Championships have been 25 years in the making.

Their coach, Steven Fein, a hematologist at Baptist Hospital, has been involved with Odyssey of the Mind as a participant, judge and coach since 1986. Now, with his son, Michael Fein, on the team headed to the world championships, and another son on the third-grade team Fein also coaches, his house has become “OM Central.”

Fein began coaching the fifth-graders when they were in first grade, with plans to groom them for the world championships. He said the key to a winning solution is combining the technical and the artistic.

“The winning Odyssey of the Mind teams are the ones that can bring both artistic and engineering, even when you’re asked to only bring one of them,” Fein said. “I can’t say I’ve figured out the formula to win, but I can say it teaches them the value of both.”

Fein’s fifth-grade team worked on the “Extreme Mouse Mobile” problem this year. The problem required them to build and run vehicles powered by mousetraps. The team also had to create a themed skit during which the mouse mobiles perform stunts.

“It’s a lot of work,” Michael said. “Each car takes an hour to build and we have 13 different cars. I’ve stayed up till midnight working, but we have fun, and that’s why it’s worth it.”

Although students are required to do their own work, and even quizzed on it by judges, at David Lawrence the Odyssey of the Mind practices, held three times a week, have become all-consuming tasks that have gotten parents involved too.

“Families get to know one another really well, especially when you’re going to State’s or World’s,” said Karen DeLeon, whose daughter, Lauren, is a member of the David Lawrence team.

“Going to someone’s home every Saturday, or opening up your own home and feeding all those

kids, transferring the props from one house to another, figuring out who has storage.. we as parents, try to play upon each other's strengths."

All seven members of the David Lawrence team are involved in other after-school activities, ranging from National Junior Honor Society to choir, orchestra and gymnastics. But all the kids said Odyssey of the Mind offers them something no other experience can.

"It's a good way to express yourself after school with your friends," said Brittany Chandani, an eighth-grader on the team, who acknowledged that conflicts can sometimes arise.

"We face predicaments," Brittany said. "We get mad at each other, but we never end up full-blown fighting. Weekends are the worst. We're 10 percent extra cranky on weekends."

From the parents' point of view, Odyssey of the Mind provides something kids don't always get in the classroom, the chance to think outside the box.

"She's very into her studies and she's a gymnast, so she has her academics and her physical stuff and this is her creative," said Diane Shapiro, whose daughter Rachel is a seventh-grader on the team.

"School can be very in the box, and they need that too, but really, more and more, electives are not what they should be, or used to be. This gives them that."

For the kids, it's more about the fun.

"I've learned how glue and duct tape are very important," said Toni Correa, a sixth-grader on the team. "Ideas come from other ideas, and TV shows."

David Lawrence and Palmetto Elementary are unique, in that they both have enthusiastic parents and teachers to make the commitment necessary to coach an Odyssey of the Mind team. According to the Odyssey of the Mind regional website, in Miami-Dade there are only four elementary schools and seven middle schools with teams. Fein said that he wishes more schools would get involved.

"Dade County is ridiculous," he said. "No one's interested. You go to State's and Tampa will have like 100 teams, and Miami will have like 10. As a kid doing Odyssey of the Mind, and having teachers that encouraged me and pushed me to do it had such an impact on my future. I think it would be valuable for other schools to try to put together somehow."

Erik Veiga, Odyssey of the Mind director for the Tropical Region, said Miami-Dade's participation is much lower than other counties. He thinks the problem is that in recent years several programs have lost their sponsors.

"We've had a slow decline in interest over the years," Veiga said. "A lot of our programs were long-term programs and the sponsors retired. We're building interest by reaching out to schools."

Veiga said he's trying to target charter schools and private or religious schools, in the hopes of expanding the program.

"What makes Odyssey different from other school programs is the kids are put front and center in coming up with ideas and managing projects," Veiga said. "The adults are there to provide guidance and a meeting place, but their success or failure, and whether they learn in the process, is up to the kids."

The kids from David Lawrence seem to have no problem getting their school behind them. Their principal, Bernard Osborn, traveled to Orlando to support them at State Finals and is in Maryland with them for the World Championships.

Osborn attributes the team's success to the support they've received not only from their parents and coaches, but from their school and their community.

"The school and the community in North Miami have embraced the program," he said. "I couldn't be more proud of the kids.

"At the end of the state competition we went to the awards ceremony and when they finally called our name it was truly a magical moment. Parents were crying and the kids were crying, knowing they went up against the best in the state and won."

Like any good principal, Osborn believes every student at the David Lawrence K-8 Center is a star, but the Odyssey of the Mind kids are the ones willing to go the extra mile.

"These are the students that really don't mind going above and beyond. There's a direct correlation between over-achieving and success in Odyssey of the Mind," he said. "It's building their self-esteem and self-confidence. They build each other up."

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