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Palmetto Bay elementary school wins fourth place in Odyssey of the Mind

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Bottom: Sofia Vinueza, Leah Melendez and Kennedy Todd.
Top: Andres Laventman, Alex Eum, Matthew Lamas and Savannah Cain. Howard Drive Elementary School's Odyssey of the Mind team poses for a group shot with some of their props from the competition and with their trophy at the school.

A group of fourth-graders sits around a table.

"Who cut the cheese?" asks Kennedy Todd, 10. Everyone laughs.

Kennedy's joke seems obvious, but she was referring to her team's skit that swaps King Arthur's sword in a stone and makes it a sword in a block of cheese.

Who cut the cheese?

Kennedy is one of seven fourth-graders who are a part of Howard Drive Elementary School's Odyssey of the Mind team; the same team that won fourth place at the world finals on May 23.

OM, as participants call it, is a creative, problem-solving competition that runs from elementary

school through college. The problems are spontaneous and long-term and can be technical, artistic or performance-based. The team from Howard Drive had to create a story based on parameters set by the competition, then perform skits from their story and answer questions from judges about how they came up with it.

Howard Drive's Odyssey of the Mind team placed fourth in the world finals May 23 at Michigan State University. The seven team members competed against groups from 12 other countries, including Poland, Russia and China.

The difference between school and OM is that you're allowed to be as crazy as you want. At least that's how Matthew Lamas, 10, described it.

Coaches Milton and Lida Todd guided the team by pointing out strengths, exposing them to different things, asking thought-provoking questions and teaching them how to use power tools safely. They'd never coached a team before, but they wanted their daughter Kennedy to have the experience.

The team chose one of the five long-term problems in September 2012 and the team started generating solutions. The team was responsible for building props, writing scripts, choosing music, coming up with lyrics and designing costumes.

"It's about their creativity," Milton Todd said.

Teams lost points if they didn't make everything themselves.

"They made their magic box four times before they got it right," Lida Todd said.

All of the parents agreed that OM taught their kids how to work with each other and apply what they learned to real situations.

"We're all good at one thing and together we're good as a whole," said team member Matthew Lamas.

"Odyssey really changes the way you think," Matthew said. "People you don't know can become your friends. We became friends."

Larry Feldman, a Miami-Dade County Public Schools board member, attended the world finals with Howard Drive Elementary School. The last time he attended a competition was when his daughter participated from elementary school to high school.

It's what inspired her to become a playwright, he said.

"This is really how school is supposed to be," Feldman said, describing OM as interdisciplinary project-based learning. "I wish I would have known about this as a teacher."

With OM, assessment is independent. Judges share their comments with each participant and not with coaches.

"That's what employers want. They have to be able to communicate. They have to be able to speak well. It's exciting when you think of the potential," he said. "As adults, there's no bell. You come to work and find out your strengths and who will compensate for your non-strengths."

Feldman said he will pay the entry fee for any team in his district that wants to try the program.

After winning the regional and state competition, the team was invited to participate in the world finals, something they didn't expect because it was their first year. Teams from China, Georgia and Michigan placed higher than Howard Drive's team by about 10 points. They all returned with their own hand towels covered in different pins.

"We traded pins with other countries so that we can remember them," team member Andres Laventman said.

At the end of the world finals, it's a tradition for teams to destroy their sets and props because it's so expensive to ship them back and forth.

"The best part is destruction," said team member Alex Eum.

Howard Drive's team destroyed their life-size storybook that they'd been working on all year. Howard Drive's team took ideas from fairy tales and changed them, like King Arthur and his sword or a book that tells a story in a fairy tale.

The kids have already started talking about next year's problems.

"After 40 years, I still get passionate," Feldman said. "It's electrifying."

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