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## Howard Drive Elementary earns first place in Odyssey of the Mind competition

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**A TEACHING MOMENT:** The Odyssey of the Mind team brought their wolf vehicle to Howard Drive Elementary so their peers could see what they'd created. The team won first place in the Odyssey competition.

When the Howard Drive Elementary school team had to solve a problem, they chose to recast the popular fable, Three Little Pigs.

The team of seven students — primarily fifth graders — cast the wolf, the bad guy, as the good-hearted hero who was determined to save the pigs, sheep and baby chick instead of preying on them.

Their rendition earned them first place in the 2014 Odyssey of the Mind, a critical thinking and problem-solving competition that involves students from across the country and around the world. Last year, the team won fourth place.

“We thought about how we could do this thing where instead of a big bad wolf, he’s good. We thought of stories where the wolf is bad and we chose the Three Little Pigs,” says Alex Eum, who played the wolf.

The competition centered on an exercise called the Driver’s Test. Students had to build a vehicle and drive it while picking up objects. The competition called for incorporating recycled materials into their presentation.

The team built a catapult out of an old softball to launch a hairball into the air. They designed the vehicle to look like a wolf, making it out of wood and covering it with dryer lint to represent the wolf’s fur. They used plastic bottles to make the flowers and plants to represent the woods.

“The kids chose to pick up and move a baby chick made out of an old bar stool. Sheep and pig costumes were made of recycled materials,” said coach Milton Todd.

The students met weekly since last September. They created a story line, script, songs, choreography, props, costumes and the wolf vehicle.

Along the way, they had some setbacks. In late October, Kennedy Todd, daughter of the coaches and a fifth-grader at the school, was discovered to have a bone cyst that caused her leg to break and required emergency surgery.

“In November and December it was rough because we were focused on her recovery,” says Todd. “But, we decided to continue and Kennedy was better by January and able to compete.”

The team chose Alex as the wolf's voice and Matthew Lamas, another fifth grader, as the car operator.

"It was interesting and a little stressful, but once I got on stage I went with the flow and I had fun while doing it," Matthew said.

In February, the team won the tournament at Miami Springs High School for Division 1, advancing to the State Finals on April 12 at the University of Central Florida. Placing first in state, the team earned their ticket to the World Finals at Iowa State University, a four-day tournament with about 800 teams competing.

During the finals, there is one tradition that all the students look forward to — pin trading. Each state or country has pins that represent their problem. The most sought-after pin was the Starbucks cup. Thousands of kids came together and began trading.

"It was kind of like trying new foods, you never know what you're going to get," Matthew said.

Matthew had his eyes set on the pin from North Carolina called The Dragons; he won it the first day.

After performing their presentation and feeling confident, the team participated in another finals tradition: Destroying their props, since it was too expensive to ship them back home. Miami-Dade County's District 9 School Board member Larry Feldman joined the team at the award ceremony.

"At the ceremony they finally called our school as first-place winners and the 2014 World Champions," says Lorenzo Vinueza, a third-grader at the school. "I was so excited."

Lorenzo was the youngest member of the team and competed for the first time with his sister, Sofia, a fifth-grader. Lorenzo took the spot of another student who had dropped out.

"What's special about our kids is that they are energetic," said Todd. "They really turn it on when they get on stage and have fun while performing."