

Arts Academy team wins world championship

A team of six students took gold at Odyssey of the Mind, a global competition that tests creative problem-solving.

Walter Stern
(912) 652-0334
walter.stern@savannahnow.com

In the realm of school competitions, Odyssey of the Mind stands out.

Students don't strap on pads and helmets to see who can score the most touchdowns. They don't buzz in to answer questions about astronomy or philosophy. And they don't argue cases or dissect an opponent's points about the market economy's impact on global health.

Instead, students focus for months on a single problem, developing a solution that may take the form of an original performance complete with score and handmade costumes.

For a team of Savannah Arts Academy students, that focus on creative problem-solving resulted in a world title this weekend.

The crew won first place Saturday in one of five high school categories at Odyssey of the Mind's 2006 world finals at Iowa State University.

"I must say it was the most fulfilling and rewarding thing I've done all year and perhaps in my entire high school career," said Conor Little, a rising senior and first-year team member. "It was so rewarding to put so much of myself into something, because it could take so much of myself, and to have it pay back as it did."

Little recounted his experience by phone Monday as he and the team were travelling back to Savannah by bus.

The Arts Academy team won for a problem called "The Jungle Bloke."

The group began in September with what Little called "a skeleton of the problem."

The scenario required the team to create and present a performance about a person, "the Bloke," who could communicate with jungle animals. The animals tell the Bloke about a problem and solicit his aid while also helping him in some way. The performers were given a list of real-life jungles to choose from and were told their presentation must include an original song and dance.

The Arts Academy team went to work.

After selecting India's Kanha National Park, the group decided to focus on the problem of the black-winged kite, a type of bird that was thinning the ranks of a native lizard, according to Karen Nelson, the team's coach.

The lizards enlist the Bloke, who in turn gets the help of a rather magical sloth bear, to save their population, Nelson said.

The students drew upon the words and nonviolent approach of Mahatma Gandhi to drive their script and set the performance to music they scored, performed and recorded.

They presented their eight-minute creation in handmade costumes, including a puppet of the bird that featured a beak that opened and closed.

Little said he "pioneered the philosophical aspect of the play."

"We had the idea to put kind of deeper themes into the play," he said. "It began just as a musical. We decided, 'Hey it's in India, why don't we put Mahatma Gandhi (in it)? Why don't we have the solution to the problem involve nonviolent techniques? It ballooned magically. It was beautiful."

The combination of drama and ecology fit well with graduating senior and four-year team member Austin Quattlebaum's interests. A theater major at the Arts Academy, he may major in biology in college.

He particularly liked the global nature of the competition.

"It's so much fun," he said. "It's thousands and thousands of teenagers on this college campus. People are so open and friendly."

To qualify for worlds, Nelson said the team had to first win regional and state competitions.

The team placed first in Iowa based on its Bloke performance, as well as solving a problem on the spot.

Teams from Singapore and Kentucky finished second and third, respectively, in the Bloke category.

Separate Arts Academy teams finished 24th and 28th in two other categories and a Jenkins High team finished 35th in a third area. DeRenne Middle School placed 31st in "The Great Parade."

In addition to its sizable first-place trophy, the winning Arts Academy team has another reward coming.

Nelson, who's being treated for cancer, said she'd stand atop the Arts Academy steps, remove her wig and let students sign her bald pate if they claimed victory.

"Being able to participate with the kids in things like this has certainly helped me to keep a positive frame of mind and to keep going," she said. "I have a lot to look forward to when I'm dealing with these people."

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