



Independent, locally owned and operated!

www.lamorindaweekly.com 925-377-0977

Published October 14th, 2009

"Odyssey" Offers Mind-Expanding Explorations

By Lou Fancher

Odyssey of the Mind (OOM), an international educational program involving 26 countries, is a journey led by children. This innovative team activity, like any sport, requires agility, flexibility, dexterity and a dose of shrewd wisdom equal to Odysseus, the king of Ithaca, who used a giant wooden horse to win the Trojan War. Unlike the infamous Greek battle, defeat is the farthest thing from the minds of the kids involved in OOM. Instead, teams of five to seven young people, organized into divisions by age, focus their ingenuity on tackling diverse problems with more than one answer. Teams bring their solutions to local, regional and finally, world competitions that celebrate the remarkable energy and vibrant minds of today's youth. Started 25 years ago by Dr. Sam Micklus, a professor at Rowan University, OOM invites kindergarten through college age students to escape conventional education's fixed processes through mind-expanding explorations. Member organizations, often schools' gifted departments, community clubs or colleges and universities, sponsor local groups and oversee the coaching. Parents and teachers, captivated by the program, volunteer to lead the teams and judge the final competitions. In this case "lead" is a relative term, because OOM is firmly hands-on for kids, hands-off for adults. "Parents facilitate, but never direct the creativity of the kids," says Pin-Pin Wong, a parent with six years of coaching under her belt. Each year, five "problems" are presented: Large Vehicle - sponsored by NASA and involving designing, building and operating a vehicle; Technical Performance - creating a contraption based on an artistic concept; Classics - transforming a classical item, such as bringing a painting to life; Structure - building a balsa and glue structure able to withstand tremendous impact; and Performance - a performance based on a theme. All teams pick from these five categories, meaning eight-year olds and eighteen-year olds wind up working on the same problems. "It's fascinating to see what happens," says Rich Render, a member of the Moraga Rotary Club that sponsors the Moraga teams. Along with the vigorous pursuit of innovative solutions, the kids develop enduring friendships. Brainstorming sessions adhere to the no-idea-is-too-crazy rule. "You're always welcome to express your ideas," says Gwendolyn Tom, a sophomore at Campolindo High School. What's more, the five months of preparation before competition allows team members to gain confidence and trust their instincts. "We can set long-term goals and actually achieve them," Colton Jang says, his tone concentrated, the look on his face joyous and proud. For Tom and Jang, and all the kids at an early informational session, the combination of freedom and investigation is clearly intoxicating. Competition days are a well-organized festival of wild, intellectual creativity. Teams present their long-term work in 8-minute performances. They also face a spontaneous challenge, like naming things that hurt and what they hurt, or tying a rope in a loop and improvising with it. It's 8 minutes of the best young minds on display. Natalee Bartak, a parent now active in recruiting and training new coaches, explains the participants' enthusiastic response to this part of the competition: "The kids become quick on their feet. They can be creative problem solvers on the spot because they've been doing it for months." And isn't this the goal of education after all? Enabling students to use their minds, to support each other's efforts, to see possibility instead of pessimistic defeat in every obstacle? Life will throw obstacles - there will be armies with greater numbers - but for these OOM grads, there are no barriers, there are only opportunities to innovate. For more information about Odyssey of the Mind, visit its web site at: www.odysseyofthemind.com.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA