

# Lamorinda Schools at the Odyssey of the Mind World Final

By Sophie Braccini



The "Eccentric" team members (left to right): 4th graders Luke Waldschmidt, Andy Tobin, Joe Yuke, Jack Lehman, Harrison Drake, Daniel Ginsburg (not pictured is Arden Rasmussen, who works "behind the scenes") Photo Janet Franklin

A team of 4th graders from Sleepy Hollow in Orinda and two teams from Joaquin Moraga Intermediate made it to the World Final of the "Odyssey of the Mind" competition in Maryland last week. In this incredible Olympic games of the mind, where 846 teams from 30 different countries competed, the 8th graders from Moraga won 4th place, the 6th grade team took 11th and the Orinda team tied for 22nd place out of 44 (not bad for first-timers).

Odyssey of the Mind is a worldwide creative problem-solving program that challenges teams of students from K-college. They compete in five categories of pre-defined problems and are divided into four age groups.

The Sleepy Hollow team, sponsored by the Orinda School district, chose "The Eccentric" subject: a problem that addressed an earth system (biosphere, atmosphere...) that would be solved by a group of three eccentric characters in an eight-minute play.

During the competition teams are given additional spontaneous problems that are to be solved without the coach. "One of the things I enjoyed most," says mother and coach Janet Franklin, is

how during our brainstorming process kids built on each other's ideas, coming out with group solutions that were much better than anything they would have found alone."

The fictitious problem they chose addressed the oceans (the hydrosphere) that were changing color due to paint runoffs. The three 'eccentrics' were a flamboyant Mayor who only spoke to a hand puppet, a mad scientist that was afraid of germs and his simple-minded assistant who wore a huge hat where he stored stuff, including his food. "Since we had started only in December, we had to work very hard to be ready for the first level competition in March," says Franklin, "we met from once a week to almost everyday on the last leg." She explains that the participants practiced solving spontaneous problems at each of their encounters as well and they did very well in this category.

The process and dynamic was the same for the Moraga teams. The 8th grade team is a group of three girls and three boys that have been competing together since 4th grade. They are used to the pressure of competition and finished first at the Regional level

solving a Dinosaur Extinction problem.

That won them the privilege of being selected with only two other American teams to participate in the Eurofest competition, from the European branch of Odyssey of the mind; off they went to Hungary.

Linda Wong, mother of competitor Gwendolyn Tom, recounts: "Our team met many other teams from Poland, Germany, Slovakia, Moldova, Russia, Estonia, India, Belarus, Romania and Cameroon. One of the highlights of the festival was the competition in the Mixed Team problem, where three teams from different countries combined to solve and present a new Odyssey problem. Our team was paired with a team from New Delhi, India, and a team from Minsk, Belarus. You can imagine the communication challenges between these kids. Add in an age difference of eight years with one of the teams (5-6 year olds from Belarus) and you have a situation that requires patience and perseverance. Much to their surprise and glee this trio of multinational kids pulled off a first place victory."

The Moraga teams are not sponsored by the school district.

When the district declined for liability reasons, parents approached the Moraga Rotary Club that not only became their community sponsor in name, but also paid for team registration fees, T-shirts, and building and shipping costs for teams advancing to the World Finals.

"There are many sports program in this community, but not many activities that promote creativity and foster team work at the same time," says Rotarian Rich Render. "I believe that one element of the success of the JM teams is the fact that they come together and stay together year after year since the 4th grade," he adds, "they are very cohesive, they own their capabilities, and they are very competitive."

The Orinda School District will advertise the program again in the fall. Lafayette didn't have a team at the World Finals this year, but Lafayette schools have been successfully represented in prior years. The Moraga teams will hold a public information meeting in the library in September and they encourage all interested students to attend.



Moraga team in Hungary with siblings

Photo Pin-Pin Wong