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Moraga Rotary and Odyssey of the Mind: A Winning Combination

Submitted by Gary Irwin and Pin-Pin Wong



Moraga Odyssey of the Mind team members (from left) Nicki Bartak, Raymond Tsou, Sophia Angelides, Gwendolyn Tom, Layth Ramatala, and Colton Jang, stand by the Terrapin mascot at the University of Maryland during the 2010 World Finals.

Photo provided

Every year since 2005, there have been at least eight Odyssey of the Mind (OoTM) teams competing at the Regional competition under the banner of "Moraga Rotary" thanks to a simple conversation between Pin-Pin Wong and former Moraga Rotary president Rich Render at Rancho Laguna Park.

Wong explained about the lack of school sponsorship of OoTM in Moraga. Render had a solution; he convinced the Moraga Rotary to sponsor OoTM, a creative problem solving competition for elementary to high school aged children, as part of its community service effort. Since its inception, hundreds of Moraga kids have participated in the program.

In 2012, four of the 10 teams qualified to move on to the State Tournament in Brentwood, and two high school teams came in first in their division to qualify for the World Finals at Ames, Iowa. One of the original teams has been together for eight years; its members are now Campolindo high school graduates and are heading to colleges across the nation.

Layth Ramatala, described as "the soul of the team" and natural leader, will attend New York University. Sophia Angelides, with

her sunny personality, great sense of humor, and strong work ethic, will attend UCLA to study life sciences. Nicki Bartak, an original member of the team with an unstoppable creative streak, is off to George Washington University to study international affairs. Colton Jang, another original team member, one of the team's biggest risk takers, will study economics or engineering at Yale University. Gwendolyn Tom, the resident artist of the group who wowed the judges with her forest mosaic made from recycled calendars, will attend American University in Washington D.C., and Raymond Tsou, the provider of comic relief for the team, will be studying at U.C. Davis this fall.

This phenomenal team has won six State championships and four World Finalist top 10 placements. They have won Omer Awards for outstanding sportsmanship and exemplary behavior, and the prestigious Ranatra Fusca at every level of competition. Last year, they were dubbed "Team Awesome" by World Finalist judges.

The team is made up of the Student Body president, class presidents, treasurers and spirit commissioners; lifetime members of the California Scholarship Fed-

eration; Coca Cola Scholars, and National Merit Commended and Finalist Scholars. They have been selected for Campolindo Department Awards in English, history, social studies, language, physical education and leadership. They are varsity athletes in golf, swimming, and water polo. They are CIF Scholar-Athletes and AP Scholars. They are National Charity League members. They are Eagle Scouts and Girl Scout Gold Award recipients. They have started a micro-finance club and volunteered in Africa and Cambodia. They have performed in the high school musicals and volunteered hundreds of hours of community service. They are recipients of the California State Odyssey of the Mind Scholarships. They are the best of friends.

While this team of graduating seniors chose not to compete in the World Finals, the other high school team made up of Campolindo sophomores placed third against very tough international competition. They continue the tradition of excellence for Moraga teams, who have sent at least one team to the World Finals in six out of the past seven years, all of which placed in the top 10 every year they attended.

Family Focus

Calm, Assertive Parenting

By Margie Ryerson, MFT

Being a dog lover, parent, and therapist, I can't help but see occasional parallels between human-dog relationships and parent-child relationships. In both cases, the preferable "leader" behavior is to be calm and assertive.

After a few therapy sessions with parents and their children, I can practically become a fly on the wall for a short time and observe their interactions. Often a parent becomes provoked and begins to lose his or her temper. This reaction can occur for a variety of reasons: a child refuses to talk, a child is defiant and disrespectful, a child persistently challenges a parent's version of incidents, or a child loses his or her temper.

A parent facing any of these responses from his child has every right to feel frustrated and angry. However, the idea of calm, assertive parenting is to accept that you have a right to feel a certain way internally, but to avoid expressing these feelings externally. This approach requires rational thought, self-control, and lots of practice.

Before we look at what is needed to be calm and assertive, let's look at the negative implications of behaving in the opposite way – in a volatile and aggressive manner.

Parents who consistently lose their temper:

—Can trigger hurt, anger, frustration, anxiety, depression, and lowered self-esteem and self-confidence in their children.

—Often feel guilty afterwards and may try to compensate for their angry outbursts by doing or buying too much for their kids.

—Set a negative example for their children of how to handle frustration and anger.

—Discourage their children from communicating in positive ways with them, setting the stage for continued anger and possible alienation.

—Feel like bad parents, despite all the otherwise wonderful and loving words and deeds they may bestow upon their children.

Here are a few tips for being a calm, assertive parent:

—Take time to think about what you want to say and do. Words can be quite hurtful and damaging. Parents may think a simple apology will smooth things over with their children, but they take a risk. In my therapy practice I see teens and adults who remain wounded by words uttered in their families many years ago.

—Use "I" messages. Telling a child, "I'm really furious at you right now," or "I feel very hurt by what you just said to me," or "I'm so upset right now, I don't know what to say," are all good ways to express yourself initially.

—Separate yourself from your child if possible when you sense the situation is escalating.

—Some children and teens respond best to a written dialogue rather than a verbal one. Ask your child if he wants to e-mail or pass a notebook back and forth to air feelings and discuss issues.

—Try to discover the underlying factors contributing to the con-

flict. Children often don't connect their behavior to causal events and they need your help trying to interpret and understand.

For example, one set of parents came in to get help in dealing with their defiant, uncooperative, and uncommunicative 17-year-old son. Jacob wasn't putting effort into school, household chores, or in getting along with his sister or parents. His only concerns seemed to be his friends and playing video games.

In working with Jacob and his parents, we uncovered the source of his poor attitude and behavior: Jacob was extremely discouraged about his poor performance in his math class. At first he tried to do well in the class, but he didn't succeed. So Jacob decided that it was no use trying very hard in any of his classes since he probably wouldn't do well anyway. By assuming this attitude, he protected himself from further disappointment and pain. When his parents became angry that he wasn't putting effort into his studies, Jacob rebelled by refusing to communicate or cooperate with them.

Once Jacob felt understood by his parents, he was able to accept their emotional support and even consider a math tutor. His parents were encouraged to find out that Jacob wasn't purposely trying to make their lives miserable, but that he had been suffering silently with a mixture of confusing emotions.

—If stress is a problem in your family, look for ways to reduce it for all family members. Carve out quiet times with all electronic devices off, fun times together, and relaxing family meals. Building up good will among family members is vital for those times when conflicts inevitably arise.

—And last, but extremely important, try not to take your child's words and actions personally. This is where I often see parents becoming very hurt and angry. Children say and do so much without thinking, and they learn early on how to push our buttons. Since they sometimes feel uncomfortably dependent and powerless in the family system, they try to retaliate when they are angry and don't get their way, or when their pride is wounded. It is our challenge as parents to model the behaviors we want our children to ultimately absorb.



Margie Ryerson, MFT, is a marriage and family therapist in Orinda and Walnut Creek. Contact her at 925-376-9323 or margierye@yahoo.com. She is the author of *Treat Your Partner Like a Dog: How to Breed a Better Relationship and Appetite for Life: Inspiring Stories of Recovery from Anorexia, Bulimia, and Compulsive Overeating.*

TEEN SCENE

The Hunt for Summer Employment

By Courtney Cheng

As soon as school lets out for summer, the hunt for the illusive job begins for many teenagers. Whether it's because of a parent's insistence or self-motivated, high school students often have difficulty finding summer employment.

Those who already have part-time jobs are lucky in the summer months. For first-time job seekers, the process of job-hunting can be frustrating and fruitless in spite of good intentions and hard work.

For Michael Yom, a Campolindo student who graduated last year, the search for employment took half the summer. "Any job would have worked in the beginning, since a lot of places here in the Lamorinda area wanted college students or previous work experience."

Recent Miramonte grad Virginia Yan went on her first job search with similar results. She and a friend stopped by pet stores, cafés, bakeries, and other small stores in Lafayette as well as venturing through the tunnel to College Avenue asking about job openings. Not only did they realize they needed resumes and cover letters, they also discovered the same thing Yom did. Yan reports, "We got a lot of immediate rejections. Most stores want people with at least one year of experience or people who can work full time and continue working into the school year."

As summer slowly works its way to its July peak,

the chances of finding summer employment gradually get slimmer, as some stores plan to hire new employees beginning in September for the school year. For those who are still diligently seeking a job, though, here are a few pointers from fellow job-hunters.

Yom states that "getting into retail is probably the easiest compared to other jobs, seeing as all you really need is a high school education," and Virginia is staying optimistic despite her initial setbacks. "I do not have a job yet, but I'm going to keep in touch with the stores to see if they will have any future openings."

In spite of optimism and continued pursuit, there exists an inevitable Catch 22 for teenagers seeking employment. In order to obtain some jobs, stores require teens to have had a year's worth of prior work experience. Without experience, how will first-time job hunters get their first job? The search continues.

Courtney Cheng is a part-time co-host and the Book It! reporter for *Be the Star You Are! Charity's Express Yourself! Radio Program*. She will be attending UC Berkeley in the fall.

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