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Students Fight off El Nino at Goldberg Fest

By Cathy Dausman



Judges Choice winners (from left) Lynn Wolfe, Lauren Stadt and Sophia Browne explain to the audience how their Rube Goldberg machine works. Photo Cathy Dausman

El Nino struck with a vengeance in the gymnasium at Stanley Middle School in Lafayette, at one point even raining cats and dogs - albeit small plastic cats and dogs. The audience of approximately 200 was ecstatic. El Nino marked the return of the popular biannual Rube Goldberg competition where, as the students' T-shirts explained, they simply "don't do simple."

This year's challenge, held March 30, was to open an umbrella in 12 steps. Part mental, part physical, with a dab of metaphysics tossed in, the event is a science, technology, engineering and math-laden enrichment opportunity sponsored by Lafayette Partners in Education.

By design, none of the steps were easy because Rube Goldberg, the program's namesake, was anything but a rube. The Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist and Bay Area native was best known for his humorously complex multi-step "problems" that he solved on paper to his readers' unending delight.

Remember the board game Mousetrap? This is Mousetrap on steroids. Each year presents a new challenge. Past competitions have required students to assemble hamburgers, dispense hand sanitizer, pop balloons and zip zippers. This year students coaxed dominoes to topple, ran toy cars and marbles down ramps and through chutes, and used pulleys, levers and zip lines to complete the seemingly endless task of opening an umbrella. Rain gear was abundant, and the presentations were imaginative. One group prefaced their turn with a skit involving a three-way conversation between a drought-challenged farmer, the weather forecaster and Mother Nature. Another literally turned the finale on its head by filling their umbrella with marbles and opening it upside down.

It was a young group this year, comprised largely of sixth-grade presenters, said science teacher and organizer Michael Meneghetti.

Meneghetti says Stanley is the only middle school in Northern California to offer the Rube Goldberg event, which is a scaled-back version of the Purdue University challenge originating in 1949. While the college-level challenge encourages entrants to use as many steps as possible, for size and time reasons the Stanley version was limited to a 12-step process. Overall layout dimensions were a maximum 130 by 75 by 100 centimeters (this is a science project, after all).

Meneghetti standardized just one item in each project - the umbrella.

"We didn't want full sized umbrellas," he said, nor did he want anyone to opt for those tiny cocktail umbrellas, so each team used the same 10-inch paper umbrella.

Stanley students "put 40 to 50 hours into their 'babies,'" Meneghetti said. Still, the setups are fragile and he said that 80 to 90 percent of the machinery misfires the first time. That is why each team runs its invention twice. The groups were judged by a panel of four - a parent, a high school

student, a school board member and Lafayette resident, each looking smart and official decked out in lab coats and carrying clipboards.

"I just love coming back [to judge]," said Teresa Gerringer, whose college student is a science major.

"I'm delighted to be in a community where I can volunteer in so many events where kids explore science and the arts," said another judge, Dave Briccetti. "I'm very impressed with the science program and teachers at Stanley."

Entrants were allowed five minutes to set up their machine and five minutes to prep for a re-run. Some performed better than others. Jack Matson's "ran flawlessly" in his science class earlier that day, but not so well at the competition. When asked what went wrong with his team's initial run, participant Jack answered succinctly: "everything."

In the end, it was "all about the opportunity," Meneghetti said, adding this was "an impressive year." And because most entrants were sixth graders, they'll have another chance to out-Rube Rube Goldberg in 2018.

Learn more about Rube Goldberg and the namesake nonprofit "dedicated to keeping laughter and invention alive" by visiting www.rubegoldberg.com.

"The Art of Rube Goldberg" by Jennifer George is also available.

2016 Stanley Middle School Rube Goldberg awards:

Outstanding Machine Awards:

Group 5

Paige Towery, Lucas Ross, Marco Stassi

Group 7

Kai De La Cruz, Ian McBride

Group 10

Eilidh Kilpatrick, Malena Vermut-Young

Judges Choice:

Group 12

Lauren Stadt, Lynn Wolfe, Sophia Browne



In spite of rain cloud headgear, Audrey Davis (left) and Kristi Conner have a sunny outlook for their Rube Goldberg project Photo Cathy Dausman

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