

Marie Murphy students show off science projects



Elizabeth Feoktistov (left), of Glenview, and Nathan Gelfgat, of Wilmette, demonstrate their tower project in front of the audience earlier this month at Marie Murphy's Science Olympiad in Wilmette. Photos submitted

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The Marie Murphy Olympiad Pancake Breakfast was more than visitors expected.

It was an opportunity March 3 for the community to view the ingenuity, creativity, perseverance and hard work of a group of students from District 37's Marie Murphy School who truly are interested in science.

But it was no ordinary science fair either.

A group of sixth, seventh and eighth-grade students welcomed visitors to first have a pancake breakfast and then view interactive demonstrations of projects the Marie Murphy Olympiad Team worked hard to excel in and be competitive at a national level.

Students wore black tee-shirts with the words "Excellence, Pride and Determination" printed in white lettering on the back. They welcomed visitors with the pride and smiles that only hard work, success and achievement can bring.

A trophy from past science competitions decorated each table where the breakfast was held.

"We all take pride in these trophies," said Alex Aronov, 14, who was part of one of the school's Science Olympiad varsity teams. "A lot of blood, sweat and tears went into earning them."

The projects were highly sophisticated, surpassing the bygone days when students tested which liquid nourishment made flowers grow better.

One demonstration project at the breakfast had to do with manipulating kinetic energy. Another was about controlling aerodynamics. Yet a third had to do with batteries and speed.

Part of success of the program is the involvement of those who coach the students in their projects. Four of Marie Murphy's teachers serve as coaches.

"Parents of students with knowledge or experience in a particular area like engineering, physics or chemistry often volunteer to coach a team," said Shannon Wright, one of the school's teachers and a science coach. "Some of these parents even come back to help or coach after their children graduate."

Wright added even former students who now are in college come back to help.

"Our Marie Murphy School is somewhat unique in that joining a science team is one of the school's more popular activities," said Peter Ogden, another Marie Murphy teacher and science coach. "There are about 24 teams with between two to four people per team."

Students must pass a series of tests in order to be eligible to join a Science Olympiad team.

"First is a general knowledge test," Ogden said. "Then students must pass a science test in the area of their interest. Most tests are on the high school or college level. Finally students are given a hands-on project and have a week to complete it and write up a report. About 65 students try out and about 30 make it."

The top 15 are varsity, the rest are junior-varsity.

“Most sixth and seventh-graders are in junior-varsity category,” Ogden said. “Eighth-graders usually achieve the varsity level but some may reach varsity level during seventh grade. Much depends upon effort, attitude and school performance during the year.”

Demonstrations started.

Students Alex Aronov and Zijun Denj’s, project, “Wright Stuff,” quickly captured everyone’s attention. They built an airplane using balsam wood, plastic from a garbage bag, a rubber band and string.

“Our challenge was to build one that would stay in the air for as long as possible and not hit anything,” said Zijun Denj, whose father, Cheng Denj, was their coach.

“The purpose was learning about controlling aerodynamics,” Aronov said.

The crowd watched in awe as the plane made several trips around the room.

Alex Bailey, seventh-grade, and Atharua Metkar, sixth-grade, were part of the event’s junior-varsity team.

“This is a great event,” Cheng Denj said. “It helps make the students think on their feet and they acquire stage presence among other things.”

In another room Nalin Kundu and Alex Chen demonstrated the manipulation of kinetic energy using a handmade roller coaster model.

“There is kinetic energy everywhere,” Kundu said. “We use it in car motors to make the car go faster and in the car brakes to make it slow down.”

Luke Liu, a dad whose child graduated from Marie Murphy, returned to coach their team.

“I enjoy working with these young people,” Liu said.

Money from the pancake breakfast goes toward travel and lodging expenses and event materials.

The teams go to regional competition Saturday, March 17, at Oakton Community College. The two top teams then move on from the state competition to nationals. State competition is April 21 at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

“The vibe here at Marie Murphy’s Science Olympiad is unique,” School District 37 Superintendent Kevin Jauch said. “It is the students, staff and parents who make it happen including those who come back and help.”