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Visit with president is scientifically 'cool'

(by Tony Lange - February 15, 2012)



Visit with president is scientifically 'cool'

By TONY LANGE

Super Bowl teams and professional championship athletes aren't the only ones being recognized for their accomplishments at the White House these days.

Four Solon high school students were invited to partake in the second annual White House Science Fair last week and were honored by President Barack Obama for their hard work and talent as national Science Olympiad contestants.

"If we are recognizing athletic achievement, then we should also be recognizing academic achievement and science achievement," Mr. Obama said at the Feb. 7 recognition ceremony in front of about 100 high school and middle school students being honored for winning national science, technology, engineering and math competitions known as STEM. "If we invite the team that wins the Super Bowl to the White House, then we need to invite some science fair winners to the White House as well."

Seniors Andrew Mikofalvy and Lisa Guo represented Solon High School's 2011 national championship Science Olympiad team, while sophomores Katrina Mikofalvy and Kevin Sun represented the middle school's 2011 national championship team at the fair and recognition ceremony. The middle school division includes ninth-graders, and Katrina and Kevin were captains of that team last year.

Solon science teachers Donna Ross and Drew Kirian, who serve as the teams' coaches, accompanied the students.

Last week wasn't Lisa's and Andrew's first trip to Washington, D.C., as Science Olympiad members. They competed in a national tournament there in 2008, when they were in eighth grade.

"It was actually kind of exciting to go back there, and we visited all the places I saw in 2008," said Andrew, who has competed in Science Olympiad for six years now. He won third place in 2011 in mission impossible and in sumo-bot, or a robot that "sumos" with other robots.

"Last time, we were just standing outside the fence looking at the White House, and this time we got to go inside," he said. "We were invited inside. That was pretty cool. We got to see a bunch of paintings of past presidents, and the furniture was beautiful. It was like you're going to a science fair, but you're inside a historical building."

Lisa, who started Science Olympiad in fifth grade, said it was one of the few clubs available to join while she was a student at Orchard Middle School.

"The whole idea sounded pretty cool, and I just signed up, and it's really blossomed into something I'm really passionate about," said Lisa, who participated in forensics, microbiology and ecology at the 2011 national competition. "Watching the president speak was amazing. You could see a lot of the excitement in the room, and then, when he came out, it kind of felt like I was watching him on TV almost, because it kind of didn't seem real, but, obviously, he was there, and it was just a crazy moment."

Kevin, who competed in aquifers, solar system and towers at the national competition, said the best part of his experience was meeting a variety of leaders in the field of science.

Among those present at the science fair were: Charles F. Bolden Jr., a former astronaut and current administrator of NASA; Lisa Perez Jackson, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency; Subra Suresh, director of the National Science Foundation; John P. Holdren, adviser to President Obama for science and technology; and William Nye, a scientist, mechanical engineer and television host for the PBS show "Bill Nye the Science Guy."

Kevin brought his tower from the national tournament's towers event, which has the objective to build the lightest construction out of wood and glue that can hold the most weight. He was able to talk about it with Mr. Nye.

"I was pretty surprised, because I wasn't sure if he was just like a television personality or if he actually knew what he was doing in science," Kevin said. "But he seemed like a really smart guy. He talked to me a little bit about my tower and the adhesive I used, and he talked to Andrew about the coating for his robot arm, and he seemed like a really knowable guy, and that was really cool."

Katrina, who competed in ornithology, a branch of zoology that concerns the study of birds, and science crime busters at the national tournament, said going inside the White House was exactly as she pictured it.

"Growing up and all throughout school, every time teachers would talk about the White House, they always made such a big deal about it, and it was really cool just going in and actually seeing what they were talking about," Katrina said. "It was really cool meeting all these influential people and being recognized for all the hard work we've done. Now, my brother Andrew and I, we have these memories that we can share forever. It was great that I got to experience it with him."

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