

Local Students Reach World Finals

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The noise in the back of the empty cafeteria is loud.

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Hands fly as they try to assemble their project, while voices try to talk over each other with new ideas.

The clock is ticking -- and with a few seconds to spare, the students sit back, carefully staring at the playing cards they have assembled into a tower, which has a handful of coins perilously balancing on top.

"You didn't use the paper clips. Could you have used them?," asked Tom Walker as he leaned over the small heads and looked at their creation.

The five-minute test was part of a practice problem for Odyssey Of The Mind, a competition that challenges grade-level students to solve complex problems.

And the six Harmony Science students soon discovered there was a more efficient way they could have solved the riddle.

"We could have stretched out the paper clips, and they could have held more of the coins," said Savannah Barrera, a first time competitor.

For these three girls and three boys, solving complex problems has become a weekly task in preparation for the world finals of the Odyssey Of The Mind competition.

"We've been working on it for about 8 months. It's basically 8 months for 8 minutes," said Mary Kate Walker, who has been in the competition before with another team.

As part of the event, the students have to build a robot that can perform five tasks, and have that robot act out with them in a skit that they write. The Bryan middle school students devised a monkey that can roll, chew, punch, and pick its nose -- all on their own.

"The adults can not assist in any direct way. We can't provide them ideas, we can't tell them how we would do it if we were in their position. All we can do is give them the problem and teach them certain skills. We can teach them how to screw in a screw, but not teach them where the screws need to go. And they learn those lessons, and sometimes they learn those lessons over and over as the props and costumes fail," said Tom Walker, co-coach of the team.

And while the students have succeeded mostly without the adults' help, they say it's still difficult to get some things accomplished.

"Sometimes I get very aggravated and I'm like "uggggh!" and they're like, "can you do another thing for us?". We were trying to figure out what to do with our milk -- we have a milk and we're supposed to make it look like it's splashing on him -- and so I said what about this? And they said "well have you tried another one?" And I was like "ugggh what is it?" So it's very frustrating a lot of times because you're like "ugggh!" and then like at the end they tell you, "okay could you have tried this and this and this," Barrera said.

But the students are facing a new challenge -- and not one of the word kind.

"Well, their creative challenge right now is how to raise \$7,000 in a little over five weeks," Tom Walker said.

Harmony Science has provided the team with all the money it can when sending them to the regional competitions. So the team is having to come up with ways that they can raise money to send themselves to Ames, Iowa for the finals.

So far, the students have set up car washes and created t-shirts in which sponsors can have their name printed on the shirt. But despite their best efforts, are still many thousand of dollars away from meeting their goal. And with only a few weeks left until the finals, the students are starting to get worried.

"I'd be disappointed if we didn't get to go. And I know the other team members would be even more disappointed if they didn't get to go, since its their first year," Mary Kate Walker said.

But the adults are hopeful that the students will once again solve yet another complex problem, and one that has real world implications. They say that the experience the students will get from figuring how to send themselves to Iowa may be better than any trophy they get from the actual world final competition itself -- although a little reward wouldn't be too bad either.

"If we win it all, I'll probably drop over dead!" Mary Kate Walker said.

Upcoming Harmony Science fund raisers for Odyssey Of The Mind Competition:

- Sat May 2: Car Wash at Harmony Science campus, 10 a.m. - 2 p.m.
- Sun May 3, 10, 17: Applebee's will donate funds for customers that come and dine at the restaurant on these dates and mention the Odyssey Of The Mind kids
- T-Shirt sponsorships are also available
- If you would like to donate you may do so by mailing your donation, made out to Harmony Science Academy Odyssey, to the school at 2031 S. Texas Ave, Bryan 77802 or by going to the school's website at www.hsabcs.org.

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