



the first time...

By Sarah Dike

Sarah Dike, a certified teacher of the deaf, works as an outreach consultant for deaf and hard of hearing individuals in the Wyoming Department of Education.

Margaret's eyes were wide as she clutched her suitcase, which she had adamantly refused to check for fear it might get lost. She watched as her coach glided away from her on the moving walkway. It was her first time on an airplane, her first time spending a night away from her family, and certainly her first time seeing the moving walkway at the airport. And this was the first three hours of her trip to California to participate in the 2004 Western Regional Academic Bowl. The trip was filled with firsts. It was her first time meeting other people who also signed and wore hearing aids. It was the first time someone encouraged Margaret to do things for herself and helped her to understand that she didn't need an adult to hang onto while she walked. It was the first time she was able to successfully interact with other peers her age.

She wasn't alone. Each time a group of students from Wyoming goes to an Academic Bowl, at least one of the students experiences travel, a new state, and being away from his or her family for the first time.

One student noted another first as well. "The best part about the Academic Bowl in Riverside was when I decided not to use my hearing aid for nearly the entire trip," she said. "I've never actually done that before, so it was fun to be completely deaf for those few days and still not miss out on anything. Who needs hearing when you're around deaf people? It was interesting and it made me a lot more observant of what was going on around me." She had never been to California before and loved it so much that she would like to go to college at California State University-Northridge.

Another Wyoming student met the first girl with whom he felt he could communicate. They met at the first activity in the gym at the 2003 Western Regional Academic Bowl in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The following fall they both enrolled at Gallaudet and started dating. They are still together at Arizona State University.

For many students, it is their first time being in a large group of deaf people. Most of the team members come from small Wyoming towns where they are the only deaf students in their schools and quite often the only deaf people in their towns. There is no longer a school for the deaf in Wyoming. Meeting their other Wyoming team members is often the first time they can communicate effectively with other people their age. In fact, during the first Wyoming trip to the

Far right: The Wyoming team faced "firsts" in the regional competition.



Photography by Hui Zhang



Academic Bowl in 2003, the adults had to keep reminding the kids that they could communicate with other people directly and that they did not need an interpreter!

When the Wyoming team prepares to travel to the Academic Bowl, whether on a plane or in a van, it is usually the first time they meet the other members of the team. They don't have the luxury of going to school together, living in the dorms together, or even of having the same teacher. They are meeting their fellow teammates for the first time and generally their coaches for only the second time. Imagine packing a suitcase to spend four or five days away from your family in a place you have never been with a group of people you have

never met. What a leap of faith for the students to even want to attend and for their parents to sign the permission form and let them go!

This year the Wyoming team is fortunate to be a member of the Mid-Atlantic/At-Large region. Although the students and coaches will miss the friends they have made in the Western region, all are looking forward to a fantastic experience and many new firsts! For four out of the five students it will be their first time attending the Academic Bowl. Of the five team members, only one signs; the other four communicate through using speech and lipreading. It will be their first time to interact with a large group of signing people. After this year's competition, the team will stay in Washington, D.C., and

tour the area. That will be a first for everyone!

It is not uncommon in Wyoming to find a teacher of the deaf who only works with one or two students. However, due to the sparse Wyoming population, deaf students are often without peers who are deaf. That is where the fantastic experiences from the Academic Bowl so greatly impact their lives.

During the four days at the regional tournament, Margaret learned about her own resiliency and independent skills. She marveled that so many people wore hearing aids and signed, too. She found the courage to get back on the plane and weathered a snowstorm and flight delays. On the first school day after returning home from California, Margaret found her hearing aids and proudly wore them to school. She realized there were many independent people in this world who are deaf. And she knew there was a world with deaf people beyond her small town. Her self-confidence and self-esteem began to soar.

The Academic Bowl was a life-changing experience for Margaret, as it is for all the students and adults from Wyoming who attend. Most of all, the students feel a part of something bigger than themselves; they do not feel alone in the world. Seven of our eight high school graduates who participated in the Academic Bowl are now enrolled in college.

Wyoming was the first state to grant women the right to vote; the first state to have a woman governor, judge, and jury members; we were the first state to have a national park and the first state to have a national monument. Wyoming was one of the first states to institute newborn hearing screening and continues to provide excellent services to all deaf and hard of hearing students. For us, it is not so important if we win "a first" in the Academic Bowl. We know that the firsts we do experience are more important!