



“the harder we work  
the luckier we are”

REFLECTIONS ON

# eight years of competition

By Robert Grindrod

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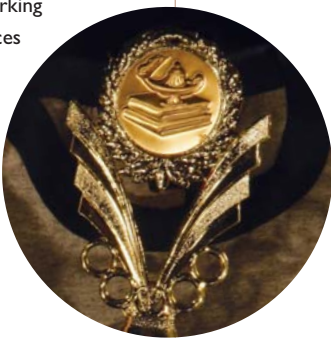
It’s amazing what one small advertisement in a newspaper can do. An inch of print in *The Silent News* announced that Gallaudet University was sponsoring an academic competition for high school students. At John Hersey High School in Arlington Heights, Illinois, there was a core of bright deaf students who were feeling the flush of victory after winning an academic competition at the local William Rainey Harper College Deaf-fest, and a regional competition sponsored by Gallaudet seemed like just the thing. We made contact with Mandy Christian, who works at the Gallaudet University Regional Center in Overland Park, Kansas, and we found ourselves in a school van headed for our first Academic Bowl.

It was 1999. Memories of that first competition are hazy, but one thing is certain: Of the 10 teams competing in the Midwest region, there were only two programs that were not state schools for deaf students—and Hersey High was one of them.

In those early days, the Academic Bowl was a lot like “Jeopardy.” Questions were thrown out and the fastest responder could dominate play. At Hersey, Jonathan Henner was our star. He was fast and bright. Unfortunately, we did not win. At that time, the third round involved skill and luck, as schools could assign certain point values to different questions. The Ohio School for the Deaf, led by their excellent player Rob McConnell, won the Midwest region.

The 2000 Midwest Regional was again held in eastern Kansas, this time hosted by Kansas School for the Deaf in Olathe. There was some tinkering with the rules and the game format prior to the 2000 season as the organizers—Bernie Palmer and Debra Lawson from Gallaudet—struggled to find a way to make the game more equitable for teams that didn’t have a speed-reading, fast

**Right:** Working hard produces success.



Photography by Hui Zhang



responding super star. Eleven teams—seven state schools and four mainstreamed programs—contended for the gold medal and the chance to compete in the national tournament in Washington, D.C. For the first time, a team from a mainstreamed program, Shawnee Mission East High School in Shawnee Mission, Kansas, captured first place in the Midwest region. The national championship that year went to the Model Secondary School for the Deaf, led again by the outstanding Rob McConnell, who had transferred that fall.

The year 2001 was notable for Hersey High because we finally won the Midwest Regional Championship and got our ticket to the national competition at Gallaudet. Excitement was high until the final game, when Hersey High's team, led by All-Star Jon Henner, fell in defeat to the Model Secondary School for the Deaf's team

with its perennial All-Star, Rob McConnell.

The performances of McConnell and Henner, though thrilling to those who enjoy seeing top students exercise their skills, had a downside. Coaches and other players were frustrated as they realized that individual star players could so completely dominate the games. In 2001, to their credit, Palmer and Lawson, along with Darian Burwell and the regional representatives, devised a new system in which each of the three rounds of a typical academic competition reward different skills, allow for all the members of the competing teams to be truly involved, and prevent one player from totally dominating the competition.

### **Looking Back, Looking Ahead**

Since the early days, the Deaf Academic Bowl competition has grown from a small gathering to become an important feature in the lives of students from

mainstreamed and state residential school programs. At Hersey High, tryouts for the team usually happen during the second or third week of school in the fall, and weekly practices begin soon after. We have lightboards for buzzer practice and literally thousands of questions in databases used for practice purposes. The sources of practice material varies widely, from old and new Trivial Pursuit questions to scouring Jack Gannon's book *Deaf Heritage* for one more important fact that might show up.

At Hersey High, we've found that out of the 40 to 50 deaf and hard of hearing students enrolled in our high school, there has always been one or two students around whom we could build a team. While we have had several gifted students, we've also worked hard to produce the success we've had. Students participate in a wide variety of activities, and Academic Bowl competes for practice time with football, soccer, and volleyball in the fall; basketball and wrestling in the winter; and track, baseball, softball, and golf in the spring. In addition, we have team members who are on the high school Debate Team and Chess Team, and who are Jr. NAD officers. Nevertheless, Academic Bowl has become a high priority for team members. Our success provides incentive for kids to want to try out for the team.

The Deaf Academic Bowl program at Hersey High is a source of pride for the hearing administrators of the building and the school district, and for the board and administrators of the special education coop that feeds deaf and hard of hearing students into our school. Every year we get reports from the program supervisors as to how many eighth graders are waiting in the wings to become members of our team!

One student remarked, "The harder we work, the luckier our team is." It's a good combination. We're proud to have won a spot representing the Midwest region in the national competition again this year. It's an honor we've worked hard to achieve.