



hooked on learning montana school prepares for fourth year of competition

By Jim Kelly II

“It’s awesome,” said Montana School for the Deaf and the Blind junior Marissa Kelly, reflecting on her experience in the Academic Bowl. “Sometimes I don’t know an answer, but then I learn something new.” Involved with volleyball, basketball, and the school performance troupe called Expressions of Silence, Marissa, a second-year veteran of the Academic Bowl team added, “I hope our team will do a lot better than last year, which I think we will.”

This will be the fourth year that students from the Montana School for the Deaf and the Blind have competed in the Gallaudet High School Academic Bowl for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students. We have gained a lot through this experience. At our first event—the Western Regional competition held in Colorado Springs in the spring of 2003—the coaches and students were unsure how to prepare. They practiced and spent several Sunday afternoons playing Trivial Pursuit—an undertaking, we later learned, that was not recommended as a way to prepare the students.

When we arrived in Colorado Springs, the coaches immediately realized that the Academic Bowl was serious business and, needless to say, our team placed 13th out of 16 teams. But the coaches and the team had a great time—and we were hooked on the Academic Bowl experience. There was a lot to be hooked on. For example, there was being around other deaf students and many deaf adults. There was exposing students who were interested in academics to a positive experience. Some students enjoyed their first trip outside of Montana and their first airplane ride. Lastly, the message was sent to all our students that interest in academics would be rewarded.

The next fall, Jennifer Wasson, head coach and high school teacher, and I took an

Photo courtesy of Jim Kelly II

Jim Kelly II, M.A.S., M.S.W., is the Dean of Students and assistant coach at the Montana School for the Deaf and the Blind, where he is in his twenty-third year.

Right: The Montana team called the Academic Bowl experience “awesome.”



entirely different approach. During the Colorado Springs competition, the other coaches were very helpful in educating us as to how they prepared their teams. One suggestion included purchasing a lockout system with buzzers on the top surface of the lights. The first student to buzz in is rewarded with a distinctive sound identifying his or her team, quickly followed by the activation of a strobe light that flashes and will catch the eye of teammates, other contestants, and spectators. Another suggestion was to have weekly study sessions.

This year, nine students participated in tryouts over a two-week period and students were able to “toss out” their lowest score. Students who were selected were required to sign a participation

contract with strict behavior guidelines. Team members were given materials to study and then quizzed on those materials during practice sessions. The coaches developed questions each week and put together a PowerPoint presentation similar to what is used during the actual competition. The residential program secretary also put together quizzes for the students to use during practice.

This year, the Academic Bowl team has been fortunate enough to have a room set aside for the practices. This room is in the loft of one of the cottages. There is a computer, an Infocus projector, and a lockout system. The room is also decorated with resource materials such as maps, inspirational posters, and other materials to get the students thinking

about their goal—to do the best they can in the regional competition.

The students spend time each week preparing for their practice sessions. They tackle the “homework” for the Academic Bowl in addition to their regular school assignments. “The students take great pride in their accomplishment of being selected,” said Coach Wasson. “They know it takes hard work, and if they study all year this hard work will pay off.

“It is important for the deaf and hard of hearing students to be given the same opportunities as their hearing peers,” she added. “Being able to compete in a competition such as the Academic Bowl provides these students with higher self-esteem and a sense of belonging to a team and accomplishing goals together.”



Justin Kauffman, a junior and a goal-driven student who has participated in the Academic Bowl for three years, said, “I would say that [the Academic Bowl] is part of me because I get to be myself at the Academic Bowl and be aware that I can be a part of a group that is like me.” A model student, Justin appreciates being around other “good students” that the Academic Bowl competition tends to attract.

William Linafelter, a sophomore in his second year of the competition, stated that the thing he is most looking forward to is “getting away from the cold in Montana and having a second chance to compete against the teams we lost to last year.” William also enjoys meeting all the new people at the competition.

Jessie Aguilar, a junior who plays volleyball and basketball and participates in Expressions of Silence, stated, “In my previous Academic Bowl

experiences I really enjoyed meeting new hard of hearing and deaf people...I made new friends and I had a fun time being with them and competing against them. I also like going to new places I have never gone to before and it’s a great experience!”

This year the Montana team has one new player, junior Tearra Donovan. When asked what she was looking forward to on the trip, Tearra responded, “...competing with other teams from other states and meeting new friends.”

Coach Wasson feels the Academic Bowl experience is second to none. “I have enjoyed watching the team make progress each year,” she said. “The students are

able to learn from each experience and each year they become more successful than the previous year.” She noted that just as the students enjoyed meeting other deaf and hard of hearing young people, she enjoyed the opportunity to meet professionals. “I enjoy the networking,” she said.

Prior to leaving for the Regionals, the Academic Bowl team will compete against the adult staff of the school—including superintendent Steve Gettel—in a mock competition. Gettel said he is pleased with the opportunity. The students at the Montana School for the Deaf and the Blind are able to “letter” in the Academic Bowl, indicating the support the event receives from the administration.

“Montana School for the Deaf and the Blind strives to provide deaf and hard of hearing students with a rich academic, social, and cultural environment,” said Gettel. “The traditional extracurricular

athletic and arts programs provide an outlet for many students but for some others, the Academic Bowl is their ticket to the self-expression of a personal interest in developing academic competence. Along with expanding their own experience as scholars, these students serve as role models and motivators for the rest of the student body. They demonstrate that curiosity and excelling in learning can be challenging, rewarding, and fun.”

Fortunate to have the support of its foundation, the students only need to pay \$50 to cover their expenses for the trip. The Montana School for the Deaf and the Blind is both pleased and honored to participate in the Academic Bowl. The students and staff take great pride in being team members and work diligently to prepare for each competition. As they anxiously await this year’s regional competition in Santa Fe, New Mexico, they are ready for head-to-head competition with the rest in the Western Region and can give it their best effort yet!

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