



SUDDENLY IT WAS

cool to be smart a principal catches academic bowl fever

By Jon Levy

Jon Levy, M.A., is principal of the Orange County Department of Education's Regional Deaf and Hard of Hearing Program at University High School in Irvine, California.

When Pam Snedigar, Gallaudet University Regional Center director for the West Coast, asked me if our program was willing to host the Western Regional Academic Bowl in 2000, I was a little apprehensive. As the principal of the Orange County Department of Education's Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) Program at University High School, a regional mainstream deaf program in Irvine, California, I had had no prior experience with the Gallaudet-sponsored event. Little did I know that by participating in this competition, our program would grow in wonderful and exciting ways.

The University High School DHH Program is home to 125 deaf and hard of hearing students from all over Orange County in sunny Southern California. No less than 28 separate school districts are represented in our diverse student body. Students have the opportunity to be mainstreamed alongside 2,300 hearing students at our school or to be educated in classes for deaf students and participate in a parallel curriculum. Prior to the 2000 Deaf Academic Bowl, our program had participated in deaf basketball tournaments and cheerleading contests, but we did not have much experience with academic competitions.

First we recruited two staff members as coaches—Kay Anderson and Laurie Drago. Then we began to publicize tryouts for students who wanted to join the school team. We had over 15 students take a two-hour exam that tested their knowledge of geography, math, science, literature, current events, history, and deaf culture. Soon we had a team comprised of five enthusiastic members—R.J. Kidd, Alaina Talbott, Allison Gibbons, Reagan Anders, and Nate Elliott. They practiced diligently with their coaches and played practice matches against the staff whenever they could.

Photography by Hui Zhang

Right: The competition of the Western Regional Academic Bowl would have lasting impact on the schools and students that participated.







In the meantime, enthusiasm for the coming event was bubbling over. We contacted local businesses to donate food and had over 75 volunteers from the local deaf community. Teachers and staff from both University High School and Venado Middle School turned out to proctor, run technical equipment, work on scheduling, and coordinate volunteers. We arranged lodging for all the teams and their coaches at a local hotel and set up transportation to and from the school. Gallaudet staff flew out to train our staff.

In the days leading up to the event, I witnessed a real paradigm shift on campus; suddenly it was cool to be smart. Academic Bowl fever had spread throughout our school, and the Deaf Academic Bowl team students were now the most popular students on campus—a principal's dream! On the Thursday night before the competition, teams started arriving on campus. There were two teams from Arizona, two teams from Oregon, six teams from Southern California, and two teams from Northern California.

Friends were made quickly as coaches attended meetings and students attended orientations. Gallaudet representatives answered questions about the tournament, explained the rules, and set the tone for the competition that followed. That same evening, students enjoyed beautiful weather, outdoor swimming, and a big pizza dinner.

The Competition— Cheers, Tears, and the Spirit of Fun

For the next two days, spectators were treated to some hot competition. The 12 teams played against each other, game after game, until the final championship competition. In the championship competition, our school, University High School, was pitted against the previous year's Western Regional

champions and defending national champions, California School for the Deaf-Fremont. This was the first time University High School had ever participated in a Regional Academic Bowl, and our team members were a bit daunted by the prospect of taking on the national champions.

The final competition took place in our theater with 400 students, staff, parents, and community members in attendance, including Gallaudet president I. King Jordan. It was standing room only. The final round of the championship competition played like a Hollywood script. University High School was down by a mere three points. Each team had to write their answers to a series of questions on a transparency. When the time was up, the transparencies

were given to the judges who then corrected and scored the answers. The room was electric with energy, and you could feel it. The University High School team members were tightly holding hands as they waited for the results. The Fremont team was carefully studying the faces of the judges as they tallied and scored. In the audience, all you could see were hands moving at a rapid-fire pace. My two coaches were practically sitting on top of each other. And so we waited.

Finally the transparencies were given to the proctors, who were instructed to put them on the overhead projectors at the same time. The final score? University: 54; Fremont: 48. The room exploded. The crowd was on their feet. The team members jumped off the stage to tackle their coaches (and each other!) with congratulatory hugs. There were cheers and tears as students, staff, parents, and community members jumped up and down in celebration. When things settled down, trophies were awarded, speeches were made, and all of the students stayed for a dance that was held in the spirit of fun and good sportsmanship.

Our school was hooked on the



Deaf Academic Bowl after that. University High School went on to win several more Western Regional titles and competed in the National Championship at Gallaudet University three times as well. The excitement and pride all of us felt at winning our first Academic Bowl competition in our own home has become a strong foundation for future events. As a result of participating in the 2000 Western Regional Academic Bowl, we built wonderful friendships with several schools and established an excellent working relationship with Gallaudet University. As we prepared for a journey to New Mexico to compete in this year's Western Regional



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Academic Bowl, I looked forward to the camaraderie, friendships, and good times that the Gallaudet Academic Bowl always guarantees.



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