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National Geographic State GeoBee connects students to environmentalism

By CAROLINE EGGERS ceggers@bgdailynews.com Mar 29, 2019



Western Kentucky University Distinguished Professor of Geography David Keeling (standing) explains rules Friday as finalists take their seats during the National Geographic Kentucky State GeoBee at Knicely Conference Center.

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The Kentucky National Geographic State GeoBee was a fierce, albeit quiet, competition.

On Friday, 100 students from across the Bluegrass State competed at Knicely Conference Center in Bowling Green for the state title, along with the chance to represent Kentucky at the National Geographic Championship Bee in Washington this May.

Regionally, Brady Haas of Auburn, John David Abbott and Owen Shepherd of Bowling Green and Jay Disman and Miller Wood of Scottsville competed in the bee, but none made it past the preliminary rounds, which involved answering eight questions.

Owen Shepherd, a fifth-grader at W.R. McNeill Elementary School, didn't think he'd make it past the prerequisite school competition.

"I ended up winning on a lucky guess on the Red Sea," he said. "On the test to get me here, I did it in 17 minutes, because I either knew the answers or had to guess."

He said he wasn't disappointed to miss the final rounds, and seemed to enjoy the consolation of chips and brownies.

Shelley Shepherd, Owen's mother and co-owner of Spencer's Coffee, described the competition as "very serious" and "very quiet."

"It's rare to go to something I almost felt like I couldn't move," she said, laughing.

But she thought the event was challenging for both the participants and the adults in attendance.

"This makes you realize how much you don't know about geography," she said.

John David Abbott, an eighth-grade student at St. Joseph Interparochial School, expressed gratitude for the opportunity to be part of the experience – and to get out of school for the day.

"Some of the questions were harder than I expected," Abbott said. "The people who won deserved it."

Carla Abbott, John David's mother, thought her son was a little modest.

"When he was young, we could hold up a picture of a state, backwards, and he'd know what it was," she said.



The National Geographic-organized event featured many questions on current, global environmental issues like pollution and conservation.

Scott Dobler, the Kentucky steward for National Geographic, thought the students were well prepared for the event, and he hopes the competition might inspire the students to some day consider geography-related jobs – such as environmental managers or urban planners – which often play crucial roles in tackling environmental issues.

"It's really demonstrating their geographic knowledge of the world around us, both physically and culturally," Dobler said. "It helps with their higher-level thinking skills."

For the last round of competition, David Keeling, the Western Kentucky University distinguished professor of geography, quizzed the 10 finalists – those who provided the most correct answers in the preliminaries – on geography related to explorers, endangered animals and rare, geographic features.

The audience's facial expressions suggested the students knew far more geography than their parents.

“These kids are good – if you have dinner reservations, you might want to put them on hold,” said Keeling, who was playful and encouraging to the kids. “If we run out of questions, we’re going to have to make some up.”

Taylor Smith, an eighth-grade student from Breckinridge County Middle School, ended up beating his tough competitor, Arnav Dharmagadda, an eighth-grade student from Russell Middle School, on the third of three questions in a tiebreaker.

When asked if he had competed in the State GeoBee before, Smith, who appeared quite ready for the District, replied: “Oh yes, this is my third one.”

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