

The Virgin Islands Consortium

St. Croix's Michael Atwell Wins 46th Annual Territorial Spelling Bee

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ST. CROIX -- Good Hope Country Day School's Michael Atwell, 2019 St. Croix District Intermediate Spelling Bee champ proved he's the best speller in the territory winning the 46th Annual Virgin Islands Territorial Intermediate Spelling Bee, the Department of Education has announced. Atwell spelled "lexigraphy" correctly after 13 rounds of competition on Tuesday, March 19, 2019, in the John H. Woodson Jr. High School's auditorium.

At the 2019 St. Croix District Intermediate Spelling Bee, Michael stated, "I feel excited, but I just want to win the next one. I'm going to start practicing for that one."

Now that he has won the territorial title Michael said “I’m very, very, very excited about going to the National Competition. I’m going for 1st place because that’s what I like to do- I like to win! I really don’t like losing.”

Michael will represent the Virgin Islands and travel to Washington, D.C to participate in the 92nd Scripps National Spelling Bee, May 28–30.

“For the Scripps National Bee, what I’m going to try to keep calm and stay confident. I’ll take my time on every single word to get everything right,” said the champion speller.

Department of Education Commissioner Designee Raquel Berry-Benjamin shared words of encouragement to the spellers who were quite nervous before the competition started.

“Spellers, it’s going to be okay. Everyone in here is rooting for you. You’re going to do just fine,” the commissioner assured them.

Mrs. Berry-Benjamin then welcomed everyone to the Bee. “Parents, faculty, teachers, staff, volunteers, thank you for your time. This is what the Department of Education is about. We educate...we ensure our students have opportunities to learn and grow and then we give them an opportunity to perform, to showcase their talent and skills.”

Chief Judge Maureen Moorhead formally read the rules and the competition began.

The top spellers put their best foot forward as they spelled homophones, homonyms, and proved their strengths in vocabulary and word origins. The competition lasted approximately two hours with students spelling words such as, “stethoscope,” “geode,” “knavery,” “Banzai,” and “fuselage.”

St. Thomas – St. John 2018 District Intermediate Spelling champ Priya Giyanani misspelled the word “cassettes” in round 12 which brought Atwell, and Jaden Gonzalez of The Church of God (Holiness) Academy left to battle in round 13. Gonzalez then misspelled “consolidate” leading Michael to his victory.

One highlight of the competition is that Gonzalez initially lost in round 6, spelling the word “myriad” incorrectly. When repeating the word to the announcer, Gonzalez pronounced “*meriad*” instead. He was not corrected and continued on to spell “*meriad*.” After reviewing the recording, Chief Judge Maureen Moorehead agreed it was a mistake on the judges’ behalf and reinstated Gonzalez into the competition.

This year, the United Way of the Virgin Islands, McDonald’s USVI, and Houghton Mifflin-Harcourt were local sponsors the annual literacy event along with long-time official Scripps sponsor, the Virgin Islands Daily News.

All twelve participants received certificates of participation, a tablet (their District Bee prize), compliments of United Way USVI and a backpack filled with goodies, compliments of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. The top three spellers also received a crystal Spelling Bee trophy each.

Michael Atwell additionally received a laptop, compliments of United Way USVI, an Amazon Kindle E-reader, Amazon gift card and backpack filled with goodies, compliments of McDonald’s USVI, the Samuel Louis Sugarman Award for the 2019

United States Mint Proof Set, a one-year subscription to the Scripps National Spelling Bee's official dictionary—the Merriam-Webster Unabridged Online Dictionary, another one-year subscription to Britannica Online Premium and a trip for two to Washington, D.C. to represent the Virgin Islands in the 91st Scripps National Spelling Bee, all compliments of the Virgin Islands Daily News.

St. Croix District Acting Insular Superintendent Carlos McGregor closed out the 46th Annual Bee with supporting words to all spellers.

“Congratulations to everyone involved in this Spelling Bee. I grew an attachment with each one of these students.... I really wish that all 12 could have won, and go on to Maryland.”

He took some time to acknowledge Michael directly as well. “Michael, you have the potential to go off to the National Spelling Bee and come back this year with the big prize—the number one speller in the country.” He continued, “If you can spell the word “lexigraphy” with so much confidence I’m sure that you can spell every other word.”

Michael shared his experience when he heard that “lexigraphy” was the winning word.

“Not that I thought it was easy, but it was an easy word to sound out. There were no silent letters, so I was able to spell it correctly. And because I knew the origin of the word, I knew how certain letters would be placed in the word.”

A proud mother and coach, Deondra Atwell shared how they prepared for the competition.

“Michael loves to read, so he’s always reading. What we did is we made it [studying] fun like when he’s playing video games, we’ll do a little bit of studying or when he’s relaxing,” she said. “I didn’t want to make it laborious, you know? Just make it fun. Then sometimes maybe once every week we just concentrate but make it light and make it fun. That’s how he was able to prevail.”

“Michael wants to bring it home for the territory, and I believe in him,” said Deondra.

Present at the Bee were First Lady Yolanda Bryan; Board of Education members Winona Hendricks and Terrence Joseph; former St. Croix District Superintendent Gloria Canegata-Walkerman; Senate President Kenneth Gittens, Senator Novelle Francis, a representative from Senator Javan James’ office; Gerry Yandel of the Virgin Islands Daily News and Andrea Burgess-Figueroa of United Way USVI.

Feature Image: Acting Insular Superintendent Carlos McGregor, Dept. of Education Commissioner Designee Raquel Berry-Benjamin, 1st place Winner Michael Atwell, First Lady Yolanda Bryan and Andrea Burgess-Figueroa of United Way of the US Virgin Islands (Credit: D.O.E.)