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Atwell and Giyanani Win 2020 Districtwide Spelling Bee Competitions

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Michael Atwell, an 8th grader at Good Hope-Country Day School on St. Croix and Priya Giyanani, an 8th grader at Antilles School on St. Thomas, emerged as winners of the 2020 districtwide Spelling Bees held February 6 at John H. Woodson Jr. High School and Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School, respectively, the Dept. of Education has announced.

The annual spelling competitions bring together the districts' top spellers from public, private and parochial schools to compete for a spot in the Territorial Spelling Bee, and the ultimate chance to represent the Virgin Islands at the Scripps National Spelling Bee in Maryland in May.

Atwell, who was the 2019 St. Croix District Bee champion and Territorial Spelling Bee winner, was announced as the 2020 St. Croix District Bee winner after mastering the word

disproportionate in Round 9. Giyanani snagged the St. Thomas-St. John District's 2020 Intermediate Spelling Bee's top spot by correctly spelling deodorant in Round 14.

The top six spellers from each district will compete in the Territorial Spelling Bee on March 11 in St. Thomas. The top six from St. Croix are Atwell, Kalyn Blackwood, 6th grade, Ricardo Richards; Briana Cruz, 7th grade, John H. Woodson Jr. High; Jahnyah Greenidge, 6th grade, Juanita Gardine K-8 School; Caiden Rivera, 6th grade, St. Patrick's Catholic School; and Carl Consulta, 5th grade, Alfredo Andrews Elementary School. The St. Thomas-St. John top six are Giyanani; Diana Esprit, Sts. Peter & Paul School; Radz Daytic, Yvonne Milliner-Bowsky Elementary School; V'Marie Rochester, Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School; Daniel Nganga, St. Thomas Christian Academy; and Agnes Bellot, Wesleyan Academy.

47th Annual St. Croix District Spelling Bee

Now in its 47th year, the St. Croix District Spelling Bee enjoyed participation from 16 spellers and lasted nine rounds. Spellers appeared to breeze through Round 1, mastering words such as glimmer, nachos and theme, among others.

In Rounds 2 and 3, most words were mastered, but three students were eliminated from the competition on the words boycott, dawdle and colic.

Following the elimination of 11 other students in Rounds 4-7 on the words bestow, centipede, skedaddle, hurriedly, infatuation, cuckoo, gossamer, installation, rudiments, cemetery, and nuance, Atwell and Blackwood were the only remaining in Round 8. Blackwood lost the round to Atwell on the word foosball, with Atwell winning the district championship after correctly spelling disproportionate at the start of Round 9.

Atwell said his strategy is clear when it comes to winning. "I study, look at the word and get it in my mind," he said, adding, "having confidence is really good because if you second-guess yourself, that's not good. It's a mix between confidence and being calm" that can be attributed to winning.

Atwell also said that being an avid reader helps him prepare for the spelling contest. He credited his mother, Deandre Atwell, for pushing him to "learn more words" and who has served as his coach since his first Spelling Bee in fifth grade. He thanked his teacher, Adrian Taylor, for her support. Atwell represented the Virgin Islands on the national stage at the 2019 Scripps National Spelling Bee and hopes to do it again this year.

"It's really good when I apply myself because I can win things like the Spelling Bee," he said. "Not many people can say they've won their district spelling bee two years in a row, and I think that's awesome."

Mrs. Atwell expressed pride in her son's success. "He kept saying, 'Mom, it's not if I win, it's when I win'," she explained. She went on to say that Michael "studied hard and prove that once you study hard you will get the best results. Your input always determines your output."

Eunice Bedminster, executive editor at the Virgin Islands Daily News, which has sponsored the Territorial Spelling Bee since 1985, praised students for their achievement.

"Congratulations to Michael Atwell, who has won his second straight district championship and was last year's winner of the territorial contest," she said. "Congratulations to all participants as the fact that you're here speaks volumes."

Of her organization's sponsorship, she added, "We are honored to do so, not only as part of our corporate sponsorship, but because we recognize such competitions build character, and increases students' knowledge and chance at success."

During opening remarks, Assistant Commissioner Victor Somme III, Superintendent Carlos McGregor, and Woodson Principal Henry Mark offered students inspiring words and encouraged them to do their best.

St. Croix District English Language Arts Coordinator Paulina Croskey coordinated the District Bee. Along with the Daily News, other Bee sponsors included Banco Popular, Scholastic Inc., Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Achieve3000, Plaza Extra West, Plaza Extra East, At Perfection Inc., Nav Jewelers, Mini World, and Urban Threadz.

St. Thomas-St. John District Intermediate Spelling Bee

This year, 15 students representing the district's top spellers participated in the Intermediate Spelling Bee.

Students were peppered with a range of words such as furrow, vacancy, pamphlet, appetite, abundance, novelist, and more over the course 14 rounds.

At the end of Rounds 2 and 14, grievances over the announcer's pronunciation of the words garnet, amino and Graham were filed, with coaches asserting the pronunciations contributed to students being eliminated from the competition. The grievances were dismissed in all cases.

Of her impressive win, Giyanani credited her success to being disciplined.

"I always prepare by studying the main list first," she said. "Then, I studied the various languages and origins of these words because those clues help you to figure out a word you may not have heard before. I also studied lists outside of the school lists. I do enjoy reading. I read a lot and that helps to expose me to new words, as well."

Giyanani's coach, Sonya Swan, praised the student's work ethic.

"A lot of the preparation really relied on Priya because she's so dedicated to any task that comes before her," she said. "Her willingness, dedication, and commitment, and her desire to be successful is always there...never failing. Today, she rose to the occasion and showed us what she's made of. She won the district competition in 6th grade, in 2018, and she was able to leave with the win under her belt."

Giyanani's mother echoed Swan's sentiments. "I always encourage her to try her best," she said. "This year, she did this all on her own because I didn't have time to help her, so this really is a testament to her hard work and dedication. I am so very proud of her."

During his remarks, Superintendent Stefan Jurgen offered inspiring words to students and took the audience down memory lane with a game of Spelling Bee Trivia.

St. Thomas-St. John District English Language Arts Coordinator Kendra Vicars coordinated the District Bee. Along with the Daily News, other Bee sponsors included Hooman Pedram, BCB Middle School administrative team, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Beautiful Beginnings Bridal Gallery, Island Sweet Stuff, Soul Creations, WEHMO STAGIN, and Subway.

Bee participants in both districts were awarded a host of prizes, including books, dictionaries, thesauruses, and gift bags from various educational organizations. Top winners also received trophies and electronic items.

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