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EDUCATION

Like father, like daughter

By Renee Gates
NEWS STAFF WRITER

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Stephanie Boileau wasn't feeling any pressure.

Now a freshmen at Novi High School, she has competed in the Science and Engineering Fair of Metropolitan Detroit during her middle school years. But this was the first year at the senior, high school level.

"I wasn't really expecting to go to internationals at all," she said. "I wanted to make it to the final round, which is the afternoon judging, but that was it."

More than 1,400 students enter

the science fair every year, but only the top 100 make it to the final round. Stephanie knows this because her father, James, has judged the event for the past 21 years.

"I thought this would be a great opportunity for her to stand up and see what it's like to present in front of a group of people," he said.

The final round involves a presentation the student makes to a team of three judges defending their project.

Judges questions students to discover how well they understand their projects. The question can be rather thorough, Stephanie said.

"It's not scary but it is intimidating," she said. "You get a little jump in your stomach when they come."

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Grand surprise

What happened next surprised them both.

Only eight individual students of the 100, and one team are chosen as Science Fair Grand Award Winners.

When Stephanie's name was called it caught them both off guard.

"I was back there talking, not paying attention," James admitted.

"I didn't believe it at first," Stephanie said. "I was looking at some of the other projects and they were really good."

Grand Award recipients win a full-tuition scholarship to Wayne State University or Lawrence Technological University, or a partial tuition scholarship to the University of Detroit-Mercy or Oakland University. Grand Award recipients also receive an all-expense paid trip to compete in the International Science and Engineering Fair in Albuquerque, NM, May 15-19.

"It's just really cool. I've never experienced anything like that," Stephanie said .

"I think it's just really awesome. We get to go to Albuquerque for a week, all expenses paid, for something I worked hard at," she said.

A proud father, James takes the opportunity to brag about his daughter.

"As a freshmen it's very rare to win a grand award, mostly because it's the combination of preparing the project and presenting it in front of the judges," he said.

Family affair

James knows this because he was a grand award recipient of the science fair 25 years ago, during his junior year of high school.

He received a full ride to Wayne State University to major in engineering. From there he took a position in the research department of Ford Motor Company. Ford continued to pay for his education up through his doctorate degree.

He continues to judge at the fair because he sees it as his way of giving back for all the opportunities the fair has given him.

"I owe the science fair," he said.

But James didn't judge his daughter in competition.

Since Stephanie competed in Engineering, he judged environmental and life science. He is very proud of his daughter's accomplishment.

"It's nice to know that college is paid for no matter what," he said. It's the pride in seeing her create something, test it out, develop it and understand it, and then the pride of seeing her being able to stand up and defend it."

Stephanie's project was ambitious by James' standards. She tested the impact resistance of residential window glass. She was curious after looking at pictures of houses with windows blown by Hurricane Katrina. She wondered if there was anyway to improve the impact resistance of windows. From her research she developed the theory that clear packing tape would increase impact resistance. She found out otherwise.


"Tape doesn't improve the impact resistance. But it did keep the broken chards in the frame and it did reduce the hole created upon impact," Stephanie said.

And that's important because when windows break, the large volumes of air get into the house causing the walls to collapse. A house has a better chance if the windows aren't completely shattered, she said.

Stephanie is not sure if she will compete in the science fair again next year. She's just taking one thing at a time for now.

In addition to science fairs, Stephanie competes in track and cross country, plays in the marching band and maintains a 4.0 grade point average.

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