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Bedford student reaches National Geographic Bee Top 10

BEDFORD NEWS

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Seventh-grader Neelam Sandhu, 13, from Ross A. Lurgio Middle School, placed in the top 10 at the National Geographic Bee national finals held at the National Geographic Society in Washington, D.C., on Thursday, May 24.

“Sandhu is the fifth student to compete in the National Geography Bee from Bedford, the first female to win the New Hampshire state championship in 24 years and the only female in the top 10 at the national competition,” according to the Bedford School District.

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She was also the lone girl in the finals.

“A lot of the boys were really nice,” Neelam said. “They talked to me a lot, and they didn’t make me feel like I was excluded.”

Once in Washington, D.C., “We didn’t act competitive toward each other,” she said. “A lot of us really got along, and we still keep in touch.”

The National Geographic Bee grand prize was a \$25,000 college scholarship, lifetime membership in the National Geographic Society and a trip to the Galapagos Islands.

On Tuesday, May 22, 54 state and territory winners participated in the preliminary rounds, where Neelam placed in the top 10 and received \$500, “which made me really happy, of course.”

Two days later, Neelam competed as one of 54 students in a final round moderated by “Jeopardy!” host Alex Trebek.

“I was really proud of myself because all my work paid off. I felt really happy.”

“A lot of people organized social events for us,” in D.C., Neelam said. “My teacher arranged a personal tour of the White House. We had a picnic with all the other kids. We became close with all the kids there. I have pen pals I can write to over the summer.”

Each student also brought a gift from their state. “My favorite is popcorn-on-the-cob, which are kernels on a stick that pop when you put it in the microwave, from Iowa. I talked to my friend in Florida, who ate hers and she said it’s so good, so I can’t wait to eat mine.”

Neelam mentioned that the gifts were one of her favorite parts, in addition to the social events. “Some of the gifts I received were pins; mostly little, portable gifts.

“What’s funny is that Vermont and New Hampshire both gave maple syrup, which became a joke between everyone. Massachusetts gave a Patriots banner, which I definitely loved.”

In a “Meet the Finalists” video on the National Geographic website, Neelam said, “When I grow up, I would like to be an author writing fiction or fantasy books, maybe incorporating geography into those somewhere.”

“Yeah, I love writing,” Neelam said. “I definitely love writing fiction stories. My teacher told me a lot of authors that are out there nowadays incorporate geography into their books, but you can hardly tell it’s there, like the Lord of the Rings books. She said you have to picture what it’s really like.”

Neelam said geography is a strength of hers “because I like to visit places. We visit England every other summer because my mom’s family lives there. I always think of the geographical part (of places) in the back of my mind.

“A lot of my friends and family are from around the world, so I started looking up places to find out where they were. I kept going, and then I found out there was a competition for it, so I tried out.”

The National Geographic Bee is designed to encourage teachers to include geography in their classrooms, spark student interest in the subject and increase public awareness about geography.

Neelam said her brother, who made it to nationals five years ago, gave her some tips. “He said, ‘Stay calm, and don’t get nervous when you get a question wrong, because then you will be more nervous and get more questions wrong.’?”

“That definitely came in handy,” she said, as well as her brothers quizzing her.

“I think I’m going to try it again next year,” Neelam said. “I would probably prepare the same, but go into a bit more detail. A lot of the questions asked were about very small things in the world. I would study more intensely, but not too intense. I would look up things they asked us about this year.”

Each year, thousands of schools in the U.S. and nearby territories participate in the National Geographic Bee using materials prepared by the National Geographic Society, which are available to students in grades four through eight.

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