

A giraffe, Benjamin Franklin, a shark, superheroes, and a king converged upon Western Kentucky University April 2. Or, at least, those were some of the characters portrayed by the 78 teams competing in Kentucky's Odyssey of the Mind state tournament hosted by The Center for Gifted Studies.

The celebration of creativity and critical thinking came after months of preparation for the third through twelfth graders involved in the program. Each September, new problems are released in five categories, ranging from vehicle building to structural engineering and dramatic performance. The problems include basic criteria that teams must include in their performances, but students then incorporate their own creative problem solving. "The judges have no idea what the kids are going to come up with," explained Dalynn Jensen, the state association director. "They just have the basic scoring elements that they have to have in their skit." With 10 to 15 judges scoring each problem, some will concentrate on technical elements while others will watch for creativity.

In Kentucky, teams are split into three divisions for elementary, middle, and high school students. During Kentucky's 2016 tournament, 32 teams qualified for the world finals, which were held in Iowa at the end of May.

When her daughter was in fifth grade, Dalynn became involved in Odyssey of the Mind as a volunteer coach, which allowed her to see firsthand how problem solving skills could develop through the program. "As I let go and just sat there and asked them questions, I could see their thinking processes because I would see something going a certain way knowing that it might not work, but I couldn't tell them that. I had to keep asking the question, 'What will you do if it doesn't work?'" she recalled. "Employers are looking for

ODYSSEY OF THE MIND: STUDENTS DEVELOP VALUABLE SKILLS THROUGH PROBLEM SOLVING



someone to solve problems, to be creative, and that's what this helps with."

Post-performance celebrations are sweetened by the fact that students are responsible for every aspect of the per-

formance, Dalynn said. "It provides the opportunity for them to have a say in what they're doing, because it's all up to them," she said. "It's not an adult telling them how to do something, when to do it, and what to use."

Those learning opportunities wouldn't be available without the involvement of volunteers, said Dalynn, who volunteers her time as the state director. In addition to coaches, more than 120 people filled positions as judges and other volunteer roles during the state tournament. Training workshops are held each year for new coaches and judges. The Center for Gifted Studies provided numerous volunteers for the event.

Students, parents, and teachers interested in starting a team or learning more about Odyssey of the Mind can visit the Kentucky Odyssey of the Mind website at www.kyoothm.com or the national website at www.odysseyofthemind.com.

HISTORY

WKU first hosted the Odyssey of the Mind state tournament in 2009.

"Odyssey of the Mind is one of my favorite opportunities for young people. The biggest asset of Odyssey of the Mind is that it encourages creative thinking among multiple content areas." – JULIA ROBERTS, Executive Director, The Center for Gifted Studies

